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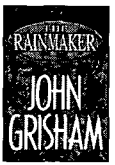

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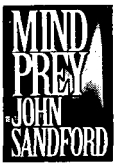

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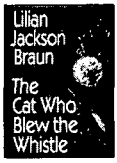

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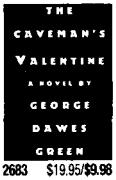

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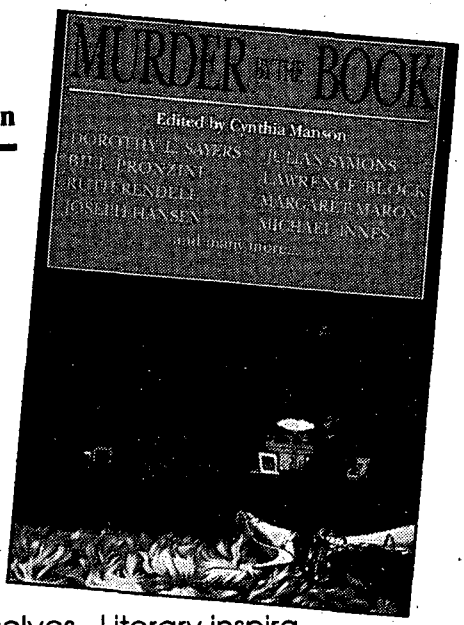

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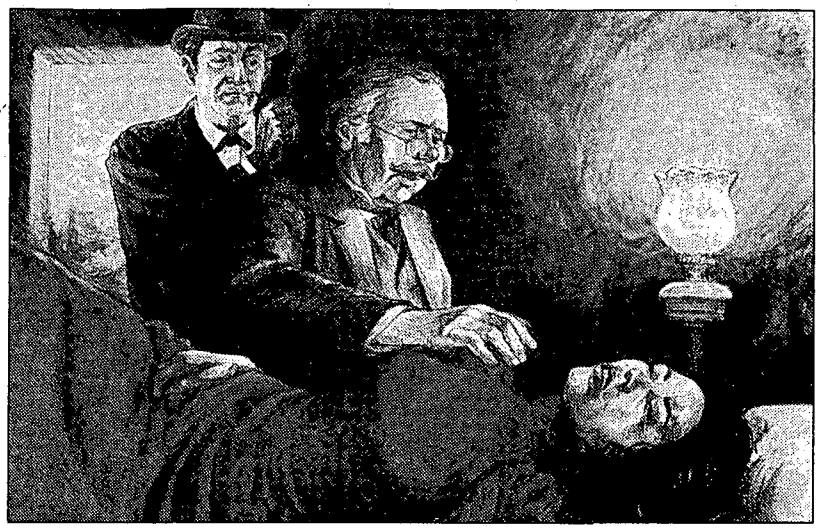

Art by Laurie Harden

The Silent Night Before Christmas

by Gene DeWeese

It was the morning of Christmas Eve when Jeremiah Scanshun, his well-worn overcoat torn at the collar, a bruise discoloring his left cheek from eye to thick, sandy moustache, burst into our rooms at 221B Baker Street, trailed by a scolding Mrs. Hudson. Outside, the sun shone on a dusting of snow that had brightened the normally dreary streets during the predawn hours, but Scanshun's tortured features were more suited to one who had journeyed through the outer reaches of hell to reach our door.

And his first words bore out that perception.

"She is dead, Watson!" he cried the moment his eyes fell upon me. "The brute has slain her!"

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I had spoken at length with Scanshun barely six months past, yet it took a moment for my mind to recall the details of what had been said and to comprehend the meaning of his present fevered words. Holmes, who had not set eyes on Scanshun until that moment, needed no such period of reflection. While I was still organizing my thoughts, he roused himself from his chair, dismissed Mrs. Hudson with a gesture, and stood to face our visitor, a slender man of my own age with thinning, wildly disheveled hair.

"You refer to Clarice Penham, I take it, Mr. Scanshun," Holmes said, not a hint of a question in his voice, "and her so-called friend, Willis Presber."

This observation, though of a routine sort to Holmes, brought a gasp from Scanshun, as similar observations to first-time visitors often do, but in this instance it also seemed to have a calming effect, almost as pronounced as if I had administered a powerful sedative directly into his veins. "I will not ask how you come to know this," Scanshun said, turning abruptly toward Holmes. "I will only assume that you are Watson's friend, Sherlock Holmes."

"Quite right, Mr. Scanshun," Holmes said. "Now tell me, did this outrage take place in the lady's residence?"

"It did, Mr. Holmes, such as it is."

"I believe you know that location, Watson. If you would be good enough to notify the police and summon a carriage, I will attempt to learn the details from Mr. Scanshun."

While I did as Holmes bid, he began his questioning of Scanshun. By the time Mrs. Hudson notified us of the carriage's arrival, Holmes had obtained a full account of the affair, including a complete verification of what I had learned from Scanshun six months earlier and had passed on to Holmes a few days later when he returned from the plains of Stonehenge.

Gene DeWeese is the author of nearly two dozen novels, most of them in the fields of fantasy and science fiction. His first story for *EQMM* is a Christmas Holmes pastiche, a perfect send-off for our yearly celebration of Holmes's birthday. One of the most famous of the original Sherlock Holmes stories, "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle," was also set at Christmas.

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Scanshun had come to me during Holmes's absence with a plea for assistance regarding Miss Penham and her ill-chosen companion, assistance which, regrettably, I subsequently found myself unable—or too derelict — to provide. I had not at the time seen Scanshun since the Afghan campaigns, in which he had served as well and honorably as any man, but it was immediately apparent from his threadbare tweeds, those of a gentleman but not one of affluence, that the intervening years had not treated him well financially. The lack of a wedding band indicated a similar lack of success in that other area by which men are often measured. I, of course, did not remark upon my observations, but my tone and demeanor when I inquired how I could be of service must have betrayed my feelings, for his own demeanor changed markedly at that point, taking on a servile air that struck me as most inappropriate for one who had served the empire as well and faithfully as he. I was particularly chagrined when it became apparent that the assistance he sought was not for his own benefit but for that of another. Clarice Penham, the young woman on whose behalf he was inquiring, was the granddaughter of Sarah Penham, a dear friend of Scanshun's parents, whose kind and forgiving nature during Scanshun's own formative years in the small town of Middlemire had left a deep and lasting impression.

"I now fear, however," he said when I had assured him that I would consider it a privilege to assist a former comrade in arms in any manner that I could, "that Sarah's forgiving nature may be in part to blame for the current unsavory situation."

My astonishment at such a statement must have been plain on my face, for he hastened to explain before I could put words to my thoughts. "I know it seems a contrary thing to say," he continued, "but it is surely true. Sarah raised the girl from her fifth birthday on, when her mother passed away and her father, ever one to take lightly the yoke of responsibility, found new diversions in other, freer climes. Clarice was never denied anything it was within her grandmother's power to grant, but because the income from Heatherview, the tiny farm Sarah and her husband still tenant, has always been precarious at best, she was able to grant little in the way of material gifts. Sarah did, however, display a seemingly bottomless capacity to forgive Clarice for her every transgression, which acts only grew more egregious as the years passed. I realize that one in your profession is far better versed in such matters than I, but it is my belief that there are those who respond to such kind-

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ness with kindness in turn, while there are others who respond only by taking advantage of their benefactors, not necessarily out of an innately evil nature but simply because they see no reason to do otherwise. Bad behavior brings them no consequences, and they have no ingrained moral compass to teach them that, regardless of the seeming lack of consequences, such behavior is not acceptable.

"And I fear that Clarice is one of the latter, one who learns only from rigorous discipline. I cannot bring myself to believe that she is evil, for many of her transgressions grew out of a tenderness of heart. Many were the times she rescued stray and injured animals only to burden her grandmother with their subsequent care. I am more inclined to believe she is merely thoughtless, in all likelihood naive as well, constitutionally incapable of seeing beyond her grandmother's words of forgiveness to the pain they so often conceal, just as it now seems she is incapable of seeing through the everyday lies of those who would take advantage of *her.*"

I agreed that such people did in all likelihood exist but ventured that no physical causes had been found and that therefore he might be better served consulting one whose study was the mind rather than the body. I was about to suggest the name of one with whom I had had contact and who owed Holmes and myself a modest favor, but before I could speak, it became clear that this was not the sort of help Scanshun desired.

Clarice, he explained, was now twenty-four years of age and had departed Heatherview more than two years past in the company of a young man, one of several village swains who had competed for her favors. He was not, of course, the one Sarah would have chosen, for a number of reasons, not the least of which were his seeming infatuation with city life and his disdain, apparently instilled by him into Clarice, for the sacrament of marriage. In the succeeding months, the only communications received from the runaway were occasional requests for money, which, over Scanshun's strong and repeated objections, was always sent, even though it sometimes meant that Sarah herself went hungry, feigning a lack of appetite that may have deceived her husband but never Scanshun. It was with great relief, then, less than a year later, that Scanshun noted the young man returning to Middlemire, but his relief was short-lived. Clarice had not returned with him and apparently had no intention of doing so. She had, the young man said, taken up with not just one but a succession of other men, each more unsavory than the last. It was the men, in fact, he confided to Scanshun, to

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whom Sarah's money had most often been turned over.

That was when Scanshun, though he could ill afford the expense, volunteered to travel to London to speak with the girl. He hoped to convince her to return to Heatherview or, failing that, at least to familiarize himself with her condition and her surroundings and to provide Sarah with the small comfort of knowing that the young man's tales of Clarice's depravity derived more from jealousy at having been replaced in Clarice's affections than from truth.

But it was not to be. If anything, Scanshun told me despairingly, the young man had understated the situation. In his one day in London — even for so urgent a purpose, he could afford no more time away from his own small shop in Middlemire — he gained not a glimpse of the girl, but accumulated from her neighbors in the dismal, sunless warren she inhabited a portrait that he dared not paint for Sarah upon his return. Not only was the succession of men a reality, but they were of even lower quality than Scanshun could have imagined, common thieves and drunkards among them, and not a one was averse to using his fists to settle what passed for domestic disputes among such as those. Clarice had, in fact, sought refuge with her neighbors more than once, but each time, before the bruises healed, she would either return to the one responsible or to another of similar inclinations, for there was never a shortage of such men, just as there had been none in Middlemire. In Middlemire, however, even the worst of them would not have treated her as badly as the best of those in her new environs seemed capable of. The latest in this procession was one Willis Presber, a layabout whose only virtue compared to the others appeared to be a certain constancy, in that he had been her only consort for far longer than any previous.

At the end of that ghastly day, Scanshun had left a note beneath her door, begging her to contact him, though he admitted to me in a desolate tone that he had had no clear idea of what he might be able to accomplish should she have heeded his plea. As it was, he returned to Middlemire and his tiny shop and spoke to no one, least of all Sarah, of his newfound and bitter knowledge.

Another six months passed with no word from the girl, and it was then that Scanshun returned to the city in a second attempt to speak with her. During that interval, perhaps influenced by Sarah's forgiving nature, he had come to believe that there was still some hope for the girl and that, for Sarah's sake, he dared not abandon her without having even spoken with her. He had rationalized to

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himself that those who had informed him of her condition earlier could have been less than truthful for any number of reasons and that either her circumstances were not as dire as they had indicated or, if he were to confront her directly and inform her of the pain her absence and her silence were causing her grandmother, she would come to her senses and return with him to Middlemire.

This time he was successful at least in seeing and speaking with her, but only for a brief period before the execrable Willis Presber, with whom she was still consorting, became impatient and threatening, particularly when Scanshun was indiscreet enough to question her about an unsightly bruise upon her arm. At that point Scanshun was none too gently ejected into the street, where his attacker, seeing a gathering crowd of other ruffians, most likely of Presber's acquaintance, put on a great show of warning him loudly to "stay out of my patch if you value your hide."

It was after that frightening encounter that Scanshun, in desperation, sought me out, though again not with any well-defined purpose in mind. Like so many of my one-time acquaintances, he had a secondhand familiarity with those aspects of my life that I have, perhaps unwisely, made public in my published accounts regarding the works of Sherlock Holmes, and he had made the unwarranted assumption that, because of my association with Holmes and my frequent encounters with the personnel of Scotland Yard, I possessed at least a modest influence with all law enforcement agencies. I assured him that I did not and that, regardless of any imagined influence, there was precious little the law could do to protect any adult, male or female, who did not wish to be protected, which his narrative had plainly shown Clarice Penham did not. I did, however, give him my word that, if she ever progressed to the point at which she wished to institute proceedings against her current tormentor and have him jailed, I would gladly escort her personally to Scotland Yard and plead her case with Inspector Lestrade. I also readily agreed to attend to any medical problems she might bring to me and to attempt, on such occasions, to point out in the most forceful terms the advantages of departing her current situation and returning to her home.

Neither eventuality presented itself, however, nor did I, to my great regret, press the matter by attempting to contact either the girl or Scanshun, her would-be benefactor. In short, I did nothing, and now, on this Christmas Eve morning, it was too late to remedy my inexcusable dereliction.

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But neither, I solaced myself futilely, had Scanshun done anything on her behalf during those six months. Until two days previous, he had heard nothing from Clarice, nor had he made any further attempts to speak with her. That was when a letter to the girl's grandmother, Sarah, had arrived. This time, instead of the expected request for yet more money, she had written that, for unspecified reasons, she wished to return home if she was still welcome there. The grandmother, of course, had been overjoyed and had insisted that Scanshun go immediately to the city and fetch her back before Christmas, which he had indeed attempted to do.

Unfortunately, when Scanshun had arrived at her squalid quarters, Willis Presber, the same creature he had encountered on his earlier visit, was present, and Scanshun, not heedful of her wordless warnings to be silent on the subject, had spoken of his reason for coming. The moment Presber realized Clarice's intent was to leave him, he once again ejected Scanshun with no little force and dealt Clarice a backhand blow when she made a modest attempt to interfere. This time, however, instead of leaving, Scanshun had remained in the neighborhood for the rest of the afternoon and most of the night until he spied the brute leaving, at which point he raced back to Clarice, hoping that she would still be of a mind to leave and they could both be out of harm's way before Presber returned.

Instead, he found her lifeless and brutally beaten body. Realizing that Presber might return at any moment, he fled, knowing he stood no chance against the creature, who outweighed him by several stone and had the advantages of youth as well. For hours, Scanshun roamed the streets aimlessly, despairing of finding a way to spare the girl's grandmother the burden of this terrible news. Under any circumstances, he said, news of the girl's murder would have been devastating, but for her to receive it now, in the heart of the holiday season that she had shared so often and so joyfully with Clarice, would be insupportable. Coupled with her cruelly raised expectations of the girl's impending return and her own increasingly frail condition, the shock might even prove fatal. Finally, he found himself again at my door, this time with no more clear object in mind than the first time, only a misplaced faith in my own meager abilities. I had no answers for him except to suggest that Sarah Penham perhaps had a stronger constitution than he gave her credit for and that, in any case, she would eventually learn the truth and would be better served if it came from a friend rather than from a stranger from Scotland Yard knocking at her door. I, of course, offered to

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accompany him in the capacity of both friend and physician, which offer he dolorously accepted.

"The one who did this, Watson, did it not in anger."

I have long ago ceased to keep count of the number of times I have been startled by Holmes's statements concerning matters he has "witnessed" only by means of reconstructions within the confines of his remarkable mind, but I am compelled to say that those words, uttered with utmost solemnity after a lengthy and silent inspection of the battered young body of Clarice Penham and the tiny room in which it lay, surpassed all others in their seeming denial of what was patently obvious. Even I, a physician and a witness to the depravities of war, had been shocked at the sight. It would be hyperbole to say that hardly a bone remained unbroken in her body, but one need add but a single word to turn such a statement into literal truth. The major bones of leg and arm and torso were in such a state they no more sustained the geometry and contours of the covering flesh than did the clothes that still enveloped her. The perpetrator of this horror had not been satisfied with merely the death of his victim, for he could have accomplished that with a tiny fraction of the force expended upon this fragile body and in a tiny fraction of the time he had undoubtedly spent at his grim task.

Additionally, the sparse and humble furniture that had once been hers lay splintered and scattered around her, as if every piece capable of being lifted had been smashed with savage force against not only her poor body but against the floor and walls and those other pieces too massive to handle so. Of the tiny tree and fragile baubles and tinsel that had provided its meager decoration, only twigs and shards and a spray of pine needles remained.

No, my friend's pronouncement to the contrary, the monster who had snuffed out this life had been either in a towering rage or in the unbreakable grip of an insanity of unparalleled degeneracy. I could not admit otherwise and still retain a scrap of the faith with which I was raised.

Nonetheless, I felt compelled to remain true to my role as it had defined itself from virtually the moment our relationship began: that of witness and interpreter. But this time my attempts to question Holmes regarding his reasoning were futile. Whatever he had observed that had led him to his extraordinary conclusion seemed to have also quashed his normal volubility so that, instead of casually pointing out the clues that less rigorously trained minds like

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Lestrade's and my own had overlooked or misinterpreted, he responded not at all. Nor did he respond to the startled protestations of disbelief with which Scanshun greeted his words. It was only when the body had been removed and Lestrade, accompanied by a desolate Scanshun, left us with a cynical wish for continued holiday cheer that Holmes spoke again.

"It is good that I accompanied you, Watson," he said, his lean face coming once again to life. "Lestrade is almost certain to arrest a man who is innocent, at least of this particular crime."

"Surely you cannot be referring to Willis Presber, Holmes. Though I have never laid eyes on the man, his guilt is as obvious as the unspeakable deed itself!"

"I am indeed referring to Mr. Presber, Watson. And the deed is perhaps even more unspeakable than you imagine, but not for the reasons you believe."

"Come now, Holmes," I remonstrated. "You cannot have it both ways. You said before that this deed was not done in anger, yet now you say it was even more horrible than I thought."

"Precisely, Watson. It is more horrible, more unspeakable *because* it was done not by a man whose faculties were clouded by fury but by a man in full control of his actions, and not by a man who detested his victim but by a man who appears to have held considerable affection for her."

For a moment I could not speak, so shockingly contrary to logic did his statement seem. "Explain yourself, Holmes," I cried when my voice returned. "Such an assertion is extravagant even for you."

"Not at all, Watson. As always, you have seen and heard but you have not observed. Recall that Lestrade had already spoken to several neighbors before we arrived. Recall also that they claimed to have heard no great clamor, no sounds of destruction or cries of great emotion."

"That means nothing, Holmes. Silence is often the rule when those who have little regard for the police are questioned in such matters."

"That is true, Watson, but it does not apply in this instance. Some were quite voluble, according to Lestrade, in their accounts of earlier disturbances, including the one in which Scanshun himself was involved six months ago. Some, indeed, noted that yesterday's disturbance, occasioned by Scanshun's latest visit, continued long after his ejection by Presber yet never progressed beyond raised voices. There would be no reason for them to remain silent about this most recent and deadly outburst, had it indeed taken place."

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"But we know it took place, Holmes! The destruction is all around us!"

"I am not denying that the destruction — or the killing — took place. I am merely stating that it was done in relative silence, which argues against its being done in the grip of the kind of rage the destruction itself would otherwise indicate. And there is the evidence of the unfortunate Miss Penham's injuries."

"I am more familiar with those injuries than you, Holmes. I felt the broken bones in every part of her body!"

"And I accept your observations as fact, Watson. However, I believe that, if you examine the body further, you will find that there was one and only one fatal blow, the one that crushed her skull from behind and produced the bulk of the blood. The rest of the injuries were almost certainly inflicted after her death and with utmost care to avoid disfigurement of the poor woman's features."

"But the bruises to her face — "

"Yes, Watson, the bruises. From their coloration, they were not fresh. The blows that caused them were struck several hours before her death, at least twelve, I would estimate. Those blows were delivered not by her killer but by her so-called friend, Willis Presber, in the aftermath of Scanshun's unfortunate visit yesterday."

"And he doubtless resumed the beating in the small hours of this morning," I said, "perhaps after a night of drinking. You certainly have noticed the smell of liquor in the room."

"Of course, Watson, but it is irrelevant and most likely a permanent condition. In any event, Presber is not the type to do his violence in silence. We have both Scanshun's and the neighbors' word for that. Nor is he likely the type to shed copious tears while going about his work."

"Tears? Holmes, even for you — "

"The evidence was plain. There were dried spots where tears had lain upon her face, not tears that had come from her own eyes but from those of another. In addition to their location, it was obvious that, in this final attack, she had no time for tears before death overtook her. More conclusively, there were numerous damp spots upon the front of her bodice, dampness that held the unmistakable salt tang of tears."

I fell silent, my thoughts rearranging themselves in the face of Holmes's assertions, which I had little doubt were true. "If it was not Presber who did this, then who — "

I stopped suddenly as the answer came to me unbidden. Holmes,

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seeing the horror that must have suffused my features, only nodded in solemn agreement.

"Certainly not my friend Scanshun!" I protested, my mind reeling.

"I'm sorry, old friend," he said, clapping a hand on my shoulder in a rare gesture of familiarity, "but it is near certain he is the one."

"But why, Holmes? Why should he — why should *anyone* take the life of one he cares for, particularly in such a brutal fashion? To slay her tormentor, yes, that would be easy to comprehend, even to excuse, but to murder the victim of those torments is inconceivable to me."

"Obviously it is not, Watson, else you would not have conceived of it. Nonetheless, an explanation will have to wait. I have only a hint of his reasons at this point, but I am certain we will be considerably enlightened when we speak with Presber, who will in all likelihood be returning soon."

"You expect him to return, Holmes?"

"If he is indeed innocent of this crime, why should he not? Again, I refer you to his pattern of behavior as outlined to Lestrade by Miss Penham's neighbors."

"What pattern was there other than his repeated brutalization of the poor woman?"

"After each such incident, he would depart the premises, often in such a rage that neighbors, spying him in the halls, would take themselves quickly out of his way lest they, too, be assaulted. However, he invariably returned the morning of the following day, all traces of his rage dissipated. It is, I might add, a common pattern among men of his type, unable or unwilling to control their violent urges toward their partners. In any event, Watson, if we assume as I do that Presber is guilty of beating but not killing Miss Penham, then the customary time of his return is at hand."

And so it was. We had been waiting less than an hour, Holmes patiently, in silent contemplation, myself in a state of considerable agitation as I attempted to reconcile myself to accepting his conclusions about my unfortunate friend, when the single door to the room opened and an unshaven but robust and handsome man little older than Clarice Penham stepped inside. His overcoat was even more threadbare than Scanshun's, ragged, likely a castoff retrieved from a rubbish bin, and his workman's cap was equally disreputable. His pants cuffs were frayed, his boots scuffed and cracked. The odor of liquor spread out from him like an invisible cloud.

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He lurched to a stop just inside the room and looked around, taking in the destruction and only then noting the presence of Holmes and myself. Blinking, he swayed backwards against the door frame for a second before steadying himself.

"Where's she got to this time?" he asked roughly. "And who're you two buggers? More of her swellhead friends from where she grew up?" He looked around the room again. "What'd she do, break the place up before she left?"

"Willis Presber," Holmes said, keeping his distance from the brute, "it was not Clarice Penham who caused this destruction. It is the work of the one who murdered her."

For perhaps ten seconds, Presber was utterly silent and motionless, his bloodshot eyes fixed on Holmes. Then, to my dismay, he laughed, loudly and raucously.

"Y'er havin' me on, mate! Right?"

"I fear not, Mr. Presber," Holmes said. "You will note that — "

"Y'er friends o' that bleedin' ponce I chucked out yesterday! What'd he do, come back and take her? And now y'er comin' here to—to—" He stumbled to a stop, his befuddled mind obviously unable to come up with a reason for our presence that fitted his suspicions.

"You will note, Mr. Presber," Holmes resumed into the hostile silence, "the blood there on the floor next to what remains of the bed. It is the blood of Miss Penham, who was slain here last night, some time after you yourself beat her and departed."

"Who said I—" Presber's angry protest was strangled in his throat as his eyes focussed on the red stain. Then his eyes returned to Holmes and myself, his mouth hanging open grotesquely. A moment later he staggered backward, coming up hard against the wall next to the door. A sound, half moan, half scream, emerged from deep in his throat.

So it was true! I thought despairingly. Unless I granted this creature an acting skill beyond any I had seen on the London stage, his surprise and anguish were genuine. My last doubts regarding Holmes's conclusion, doubts to which I had been able to cling until now, had been torn from me, leaving the certain knowledge of my friend's guilt in this appalling tragedy.

When the sound of Presber's misery finally faded, it was obvious from his features, no longer slack and uncomprehending but grim with fury, that the effects of the liquor we had smelt so strongly had been flushed from his system by the shock of the knowledge Holmes had imparted.

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"What bleedin' bugger done it?" he asked through yellowed, clenched teeth.

"The police are firmly of the opinion that you are the guilty party," Holmes said. "In their eyes, her death appears to be the result of just another beating administered by yourself, but one in which you lost control and went further than you might have intended."

The creature blinked, his brow wrinkling in genuine bewilderment. "I'd never hurt her *bad!*" he protested.

"I understand, Mr. Presber," Holmes said, motioning me to silence before my heartfelt objection to his words could emerge. "Women can be trying, and a man must assert himself."

"Bloody right! That bugger that was here said she was plannin' to leave, so after I pitched him out, I had to get the truth out of her!"

"And the truth was that she was indeed planning to return to her home, Mr. Presber. Is that correct?"

"Not after I finished with her! She knowed better by then!"

"I see," Holmes said, and I could see that even he was having difficulty concealing his loathing of what this creature was saying. "So you convinced her that her best interests would be served by remaining here with you?"

"Bloody right! It was just Christmas that made her want to go back with that fool anyway!"

"And why was that, Mr. Presber?"

Presber gestured at the shards and twigs that were all that remained of the tiny tree that had once stood in the room. "She was rememberin' things from when she was little, that's all. Talkin' about all the presents she got and how that granny of hers was always makin' over her, 'specially around this time of year. And how she was sure her granny'd take her back this time of year, no matter what she'd done."

"The power of the season," Holmes said quietly, "when for a brief moment we feel we can return to happier times, regardless of the distances we have traveled to escape them."

This bit of philosophy left Presber blank-faced, and Holmes continued. "When you left her, then, Miss Penham no longer wished to return to her home?"

Presber shrugged. "She was still thinkin' about it, but she knowed she couldn't. She knowed I'd come and fetch her back if she did go."

"Ah," Holmes said, his eyes brightening as if he had just learned something of import, though for the life of me I could not envision

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what it might have been. "You know where Miss Penham was from, then, Mr. Presber."

"The same place that friend of hers was from," Presber said, a sneer baring his yellowed teeth.

"And you assured her you would follow her there and forcibly return her here. Is that correct?"

"Bloody right, no matter how many times it took! No man'd let a woman keep his kid from him like that!"

Holmes brightened even more at those words. "I see. Miss Penham was to bear your child, then, Mr. Presber."

"Bloody right!" A touch of pride lit his features for a moment, but then he must have recalled the reason for our presence, for all the earlier anger and despair returned in an instant. "Did that bugger come sneakin' back and do this? Did he murder me kid?"

But Holmes did not reply. Instead, he strode to the door and out into the squalid hall. "Come, Watson, it is now clear. We must speak with Lestrade."

As has become my custom, I hastily followed, knowing that he would explain only when he deemed it time, which would, I assumed, be when we were in the company of the inspector and not before. As matters developed, however, it was even longer.

Our carriage still awaited us in the snow-dusted street, the breath of horse and driver plainly visible in the crystalline air. "Scotland Yard," Holmes said as we climbed in, and soon we were there, where we found Lestrade alone in his office.

"Where is Scanshun?" Holmes asked the moment we entered.

"I was about to ask you that very thing," Lestrade said, a touch of annoyance in his tone. "He said he'd be coming with you."

"But he left with you to come here," I protested in confusion.

"And he turned back before we had more than reached the street, Doctor. There was something he wanted to tell Holmes, he said."

"Come, gentlemen!" Holmes said sharply. "I fear I underestimated your Mr. Scanshun, Watson, perhaps fatally."

As we raced back, all three sharing the carriage Holmes and I had come in, Holmes once again maintained his silence, leaving me to set forth his theory—which now I unfortunately shared—that Scanshun and not Presber was the killer.

"But why, Watson?" Lestrade asked, shaking his head in the same kind of disbelief that I had expressed only hours earlier.

"Holmes seems to know," I said, somewhat resentfully, "but he has not deigned to share that knowledge as yet."

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"If we are in time," Holmes said, "Scanshun can tell you himself. If we are not, then it will be only a theory without substantiation, and you, Inspector, will have but to arrest Presber."

"But you said—" Lestrade and I began a protest simultaneously.

"It will all become clear," Holmes said in his maddening way, and there was no choice but to wait.

Leaping from the carriage before it fully stopped, Holmes raced into the shadowy corridors of the wretched building. Trailing him, Lestrade and I heard the slams of doors as listening neighbors retreated from sight.

The door to Clarice Penham's room stood open, and Holmes came to an abrupt halt in the opening.

"As I feared," he said, turning to Lestrade and gesturing him on. "There is nothing left but to locate Presber and—"

A tortured moan emerged from within the room, and Holmes turned immediately back to the door and dashed inside. When Lestrade and I reached the door seconds later, Holmes was kneeling next to the bloody, battered body of Jeremiah Scanshun.

As Lestrade and I entered the room, Holmes wiped the blood from Scanshun's eyes, and the injured man's face turned weakly toward us and, impossible as it seems, displayed a tenuous smile.

"There is no doubt, Mr. Holmes," Scanshun said in a voice that I had heard often in the Afghan, a voice of impending death, "that Willis Presber did *this* deed."

"None in my mind, Mr. Scanshun. And even if there were, I suspect that the torn piece of cloth you clutch in your hand will find a match in the coat I last saw him wearing."

Scanshun's head moved a fraction of an inch as he attempted to nod but produced only a grimace of pain. "It will," he said.

"Then there will be no doubt in Inspector Lestrade's mind either," Holmes assured him.

"Therefore Presber's involvement in the matter of poor Clarice's passing is now irrelevant," Scanshun said in a fading whisper, "and there is no reason to disabuse her grandmother of the notion that he was her killer."

"To my mind, Mr. Scanshun, there is none," Holmes said, discreetly gesturing Lestrade and myself to silence, "and I am certain the inspector will see it that way as well."

The almost invisible smile returned to Scanshun's deathly pale features for a moment, and then, with a last rasping exhalation,

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the life he had gripped with such intensity while awaiting those words was finally released.

Doubtless not wishing to be officially privy to information he could not in good conscience fail to act upon even though such action could only bring needless pain to truly innocent individuals, Lestrade bid Holmes keep his "theories" to himself. I, too, preferred his silence on such matters, at least until I returned from the journey to Middlemire, on which I had promised to accompany my one-time comrade, though these were far from the circumstances I had anticipated. Despite my experience in informing the next-of-kin regarding the unsuccessful outcome of some of my own medical efforts, it was quite difficult enough to bring Sarah Penham word of the death not only of her granddaughter but of her longtime friend Scanshun without having to dissemble even more than was already required to answer her tearful questions. Fortunately, my less than guileless assertion that Presber had been "responsible" for both deaths was accepted by the dear woman, as was my opinion, shared as it was by Lestrade, that the origins of the tragedy lay in Presber's evil nature, a full understanding of which was not possible for mere mortals. Beyond that, I could only assure her that her granddaughter's death had been quick and that Scanshun's death had surely been a result of his attempts to bring Presber to account.

Thus it was that I did not receive Holmes's account of his reasoning in the matter until Christmas night, when groups of carolers passing by on the street below lent a macabre air to this tragedy which, true to what Presber had said, had been at least partially precipitated by Clarice Penham's nostalgic memories of earlier Christmases and her resultant ephemeral desire to return to her childhood home.

"I will begin," Holmes said, closing the window through which he had just tossed a series of coppers to a particularly melodic and persistent group of carolers, "when your friend Scanshun appeared at our door, for I saw your look of puzzlement when I addressed him by name."

"I have no doubt that you did, Holmes," I said with a smile, "though I have since come to believe that at least in that instance, I have fathomed your reasoning."

"Good, Watson, let us hear it, then," he said as he settled comfortably into his chair before the fire.

"Doubtless its basis was my account to you of my meeting with

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Scanshun some months ago," I began, "which I can only assume you remembered in detail."

"Its pertinent aspects were readily available to me, of course. Do continue."

"You had never seen Scanshun prior to yesterday, so you could not have recognized him by sight, nor could you have recognized him solely by my sparse description. However, his obvious recognition of myself told you that he was someone with whom I had had dealings while not in your company. You may even have deduced from his posture, which he maintained even under those circumstances, that he was once a military man like myself."

"Excellent, Watson, there is hope for you yet. Pray go on."

"His first words, then, must have been the key, for you spoke only after he had spoken. You recalled my account of my earlier meeting more completely and precisely than I did myself until I had considerable time to reflect upon it. You recalled the details of his relationship with Clarice Penham and hers with Willis Presber, and those details fit perfectly with those words. Additionally, I had described Presber as a brute, as did Scanshun then."

"Bravo, Watson, well done indeed. Would you care perhaps to elaborate as well on my reasoning regarding Scanshun's guilt, of which I was virtually certain from the moment I spoke of the lack of anger involved in the murder of Miss Penham?"

"You knew it even then, Holmes?"

"Not to a certainty, but near enough. What I saw in Scanshun's face was not the disbelief that registered so clearly on your own features. Instead I saw sudden fear. He concealed it well, but not well enough to deceive one as versed in physiognomic reactions as I. Your eyes simply widened, but his also darted almost imperceptibly sideways, first in the direction of the body and then toward myself. Additionally, when he saw my gaze was fastened upon him, he immediately averted his own eyes, lowering and narrowing them virtually simultaneously. Even his tone, if you remember, was not one of surprise, as was yours, but of denial and anger. To elicit that guilty reaction—or, conversely, one of innocence to match your own—was indeed my purpose in making that statement as I did, with no warning or hint of my suspicions, though they had been developing since we first entered the room and Lestrade told us of his lack of success in eliciting an account of the struggle from her neighbors.

"As I said in Lestrade's office, however, I did unfortunately underestimate the man. I had not given sufficient weight to the fact that

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he had initially made his way to our door rather than to that of the police. At the time, I took his professions of distress at face value and little doubted that in his condition he would have come to you, precisely as he had done six months earlier. Too late I realized that, though his distress was real, it was not what had driven him to our door. I had not taken into account his belief concerning our supposed influence with the authorities."

"Your reasoning eludes me, Holmes," I protested. "How could I have been of help to him under those circumstances?"

"It is my belief, Watson, that it was myself whose help he desired. Knowing my reputation with the police through your chronicles, he perhaps felt that, were I to testify to Lestrade as to his genuine distress and if we were both to confirm his story of the violent relationship between Miss Penham and Presber, it would strengthen even further the case against Presber and erase even the slightest doubts as to his own innocence in the matter. However, even as I briefly underestimated Scanshun, he at first underestimated my own abilities, which he realized to his horror the moment I noted that the killing had not been done in anger. My failure was in not perceiving that Scanshun himself, at that very moment, recognized that I was on to him. I noted his guilty reaction to my statement but mistakenly assumed he would continue to cling to his story of innocence at least until confronted with all the evidence, which we would not have in our possession until we had spoken with Presber. Instead, he made his excuses to Lestrade as soon as they were out of our sight, then returned and was undoubtedly listening silently from hiding as I outlined my suspicions to you, thereby confirming his worst fears. He also overheard our exchange with Presber, whose words supplied me with the details that allowed me to assign motivation to Scanshun's actions with regard to Miss Penham. Within minutes of our leaving, then, he confronted Presber with the sole purpose of losing his life precisely as he did."

"That's all very well, Holmes, but what was the motivation of which you speak? I heard every word Presber spoke to you, yet I heard nothing that enlightened me in that regard."

"You must also consider the words that Scanshun spoke to you six months previously and again to me yesterday in this very room. Most importantly, you must consider the indisputable fact that he did, though with infinite regret, snuff out her life. He therefore had a reason which, in his mind, was very powerful, regardless of how it might seem to others."

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"But that is only obvious, Holmes."

"Precisely, Watson. You have then only to take the next and equally obvious step, which is to consider all these facts together rather than separately. You might also wish to consider Scanshun's final words."

"But those words only expressed the hope that he would not, after his death, be publicly blamed for the murder of which he was indeed guilty."

"I do hope, Watson, that if you ever write of this episode, you pay more attention to detail than you did in pronouncing that faulty summary. His only concern was not for the public at large but for Miss Penham's grandmother, whom he held in the greatest esteem. I would have thought that you, who helped carry out his wishes in that regard by carefully tailoring your own remarks to Sarah Penham, were fully aware of how great was that concern."

"Of course his concern was great, Holmes! You have just said that he gave up his own life to keep that knowledge from her! However, that says nothing of his reason for the terrible act that began this tragedy."

"But it does, Watson, it does. It speaks volumes of his desire to protect Sarah Penham, the intensity of which in turn indicates that I was partially mistaken in my initial inferences regarding the tears the killer shed. I am now convinced they were occasioned not by his killing of Clarice Penham but by the effect he knew her death would have upon her grandmother. It is indeed likely that whatever affection he may once have had for the girl was long ago replaced by resentment of her thoughtless actions, which, he finally came to realize, could be ended only by her death."

"Surely you are not suggesting his reason for slaying the poor girl was to protect her grandmother! That is monstrous!"

Holmes sighed. "It is indeed. However, I have no doubt that protecting Sarah Penham from further harm is precisely what was in Scanshun's mind as he committed the act.

"Recall Scanshun's own words to you, Watson," he continued. "He did not believe her evil, merely thoughtless and naive, yet he stated that she had already caused the old woman considerable harm on a great many occasions. When Miss Penham requested money, her grandmother complied, even though, on occasion, it meant going hungry herself. When, as a girl, Clarice abandoned animals she had briefly adopted, it fell upon the grandmother to care for the creatures. Do you not think it would have been uppermost in Scan-

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shun's mind that the same pattern would hold true for the child she was to bear? He may have been mistaken, we will never know, but that is almost certainly what was in his mind, as was the old woman's frailty, her physical inability to cope with such a task, even if she survived the considerable shock of learning of the child and the circumstances of its conception. Finally, there was Presber's threat to follow Miss Penham to Heatherview and take back both her and the child by force, which action, whether or not it was successful, could only have immeasurably intensified Sarah Penham's suffering. In Scanshun's mind, the consequences of the girl's continued existence were doubtless too dire to contemplate, and he came to believe that the only way to prevent them was to end that existence. The pain the grandmother would be subjected to upon learning of the death would be intense but it would also, he reasoned, be brief. She would survive it as she had the girl's leaving, while she would likely not survive the years of pain the girl herself would inflict, however unknowingly, if she returned home. He may even have hoped to keep the knowledge of Clarice's death from Sarah, as he had kept from her the knowledge he gained on his first visit."

"Even so, Holmes, to do such a thing at this time, of all times . . ."

"On the contrary, Watson, I suspect, though it will never be known to a certainty by anyone and was probably not known even to Scanshun himself, the heightened emotions of the season encouraged him in his action, just as Presber rightly said they encouraged the girl's decision to attempt her return to Heatherview."

"Holmes! Surely you are not blaming this sacred holiday!"

"Even seemingly noble emotions, if not restrained by rational thought, can have tragic consequences, Watson, as they did in this case and in many others we have both been involved in. You are surely as aware of that as I. Anything that encourages an overabundance of emotion at the expense of rational thought cannot be held entirely blameless in subsequent tragedies."

I was about to protest further, but the bleak look that clouded his features as he spoke those last words dissuaded me. I had learned long ago that his inner demons, when they made their capricious and unwelcome presence known, were not for me to exorcise.

Leaving him to his own devices, I turned and walked silently to the window, through which the sound of distant carolers could still be heard. ●

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A House Is Not A Home

by Martin Edwards

"She's turning her back on a fortune," said Jim Crusoe. "It doesn't make sense!"

"So where do I come in?" asked Harry Devlin, although he had a sinking feeling that he could guess.

His partner gestured towards the leaning tower of buff folders on top of Harry's filing cabinet. "You specialize in lost causes, don't you? I thought you might like to try convincing the silly old girl she should accept Quixall's money before he thinks better of it."

"I'd find it easier to make the Mersey part in the middle than persuade Gwen Vandrau to change her mind. And if I don't serve this writ before five o'clock, the negligence claim will be so high we won't have a business to come back to tomorrow."

Nonetheless, he was intrigued. Who was Quixall and why was he so anxious to buy Gwen out? And for that matter, why was Gwen so reluctant to sell? When Jim urged him at least to come in and say hello, he did not hesitate in pushing his legal pad aside and following his partner next-door.

Mrs. Vandrau sat on the client's side of the desk, back straight,

Martin Edwards's series sleuth, solicitor Harry Devlin, has appeared in four novels to date, and the author has more cases planned for him both book-length and short. The first of the Devlin novels, *All the Lonely People,* was shortlisted for the John Creasey Memorial Crime Award in 1991. In addition to writing about Harry Devlin, Martin Edwards edits a yearly anthology of crime fiction from the north of England entitled *Northern Blood.*

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arms folded, and lips pursed. She acknowledged Harry's arrival with a curt nod. By her standards he regarded it as an effusive welcome.

"Hello, Gwen. I gather someone's made you an offer you can't refuse—but you've refused it."

"You know me. You know what I'm like."

Harry did. Gwen had told him a little about her life; he was a good listener and he sensed she'd seldom spoken to anyone else about her past. She'd been born in Bootle, a docker's daughter in the days when ship work was short and labour cheap. At seventeen, she'd caught the eye of a Toxteth nightclub owner named Mitch Vandrau, and when she became pregnant he had broken the habit of a lifetime by doing the decent thing. But their marriage was fated not to last: He had disappeared from the scene during the war, doing a runner with a girl who worked in his bar, so the story went. Gwen had been left with three kids under school age and sole responsibility for the upkeep of a rambling old house. She'd never bothered with another man, and having toughed it out on her own for half a century, she saw no need in her old age to start cultivating charm. Yet Harry admired her fighting spirit, and even her unwillingness to make the smallest concession to social graces made him smile inside.

"I gather you've seen off that rowdy devil next-door since we last met?"

Gwen made a noise which conveyed her opinion of her former neighbour. "Good riddance to bad rubbish."

Harry had first acted for her a couple of years earlier. The middle-aged bachelor who lived in the house beside hers had nourished an obscure passion for the music of the late Jim Reeves. He would play it all day and through much of the night. When her complaints, forcefully expressed, had achieved nothing, Gwen had called the police. But they had done little except have a quiet word with the culprit, and that word was soon drowned out by the distant drums of which the crooner sang. So she'd come to Harry for advice about her legal remedies, and he had obtained a court order to prevent any repetition of the nuisance. The judge, a jazz fan who hated country ballads and fancied himself as a wit, had been at pains to reassure Gwen.

"Mark my words, Mrs. Vandrau, if your neighbour offends again, 'He'll Have to Go.'"

Harry had laughed dutifully whilst Gwen's face remained frozen

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in its habitual frown. He suspected that even in her younger days she had had more lines than Merseyrail, but seeing her again today, he was disturbed by the dark shadows around her eyes and the sunken cheeks which made her seem so much frailer than before.

Knowing there was no point in asking after her health, he said briskly, "Let's talk business. Jim tells me you have the chance to sell your place in Lovelady Lane for thirty thousand more than the going rate. Is that right?"

"You know what they say about a fool and his money."

"But you're not letting Quixall part with the cash."

"Where's he got it from? That's what I'd like to know. He's no more than a back-street scallywag."

Harry glanced at Jim, who inclined his head. "What do we know of the would-be purchaser?"

"Not much, except that the estate agent stresses he's good for the money. I'm not disagreeing with what Gwen says about him. But maybe he's simply a rough diamond."

Gwen brushed a grey hair out of her eye and gave another snort of disgust. "I don't care who or what he is. He's not having my house."

"Why is he so set on it?" Harry asked his partner.

"According to the agent, he was born in Lovelady Lane. Reckons he has a sentimental attachment to the area and wants to move back home."

"I never heard such codswallop in all my days," Gwen said with a sniff of contempt. "The moment I first saw the fellow I knew he was up to no good. Walking round, sizing up the house and the grounds. He must think I was born yesterday. I should have chased him off then without more ado."

"She didn't offer him any encouragement," said Jim. "Even though he made her a handsome offer on the spot. But he prised the name of her solicitors out of her and the agent came on the phone to me stressing how keen Quixall is to buy and how willing he is to pay a premium for the privilege. And, incidentally, upping the offer by another fifteen thousand. Enough to buy a nice little bungalow by the coast and have a nest egg in the bank as well."

"I don't want a nice little bungalow," said Gwen with a lifetime's scorn for bourgeois respectability.

"But the money will—"

"Listen. I've lived in that house for fifty-five years and it suits me. I don't care if it is run-down. It will see me out, that's for sure."

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"So you're not prepared to consider moving in any circumstances?" Harry asked.

Gwen shook her head. "Not at any price. That's my final word."

Harry exchanged glances with his partner. "Thank God at least for a client who doesn't beat about the bush. I don't think we can take this conversation any further, can we? It's been good to see you, love, but I can understand that after that length of time another house wouldn't seem like home. If you're happy where you are, that's the end of the matter. Jim will phone the agent himself and say thanks but no thanks."

After Gwen had marched out, he said, "What do you reckon Quixall is really after?"

"Development, I expect. The name rings a bell. I have a feeling that a couple of brothers called Quixall used to have a building yard out in Dingle. Didn't one of them go down for grievous bodily harm a while ago? Anyway, maybe the idea is to convert the house into flats. Gwen's right to scoff at the idea of sentimental attachment."

"The area she lives in is on the up and up, isn't it? If Quixall is in the building game, he must have seen a profit for the taking."

"Sure, but my point is this. Even allowing for any potential it may have, the whole building sounds to be in a dreadful state of repair. Dry rot, wet rot, you name it. Gwen readily admits to problems which would give any surveyor cardiac arrest. It's crazy. Quixall was taking all the commercial risk. At least his offer gave her the chance of buying somewhere decent that would suit a woman of her age far better."

Harry shook his head. "His mistake was to set his heart on a house belonging to Gwen Vandrau. When she says that's that, you can take her at her word. There's no room for any further discussion."

But he was wrong, for the following week Gwen came through to him on the phone.

"Changed your mind about selling up, love? I don't believe it!"

"I've changed nothing. But the day after I came to see you a young woman was parked outside my gate waiting for me. Said she was from the council. She showed me a card, said something about social services and—environmental health, is it? Said they had to keep an eye on senior citizens in the area, that's what we pay our taxes for. I said I didn't want anyone keeping an eye on me, but she kept insisting."

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"Did you let her in?"

"What d'you take me for? Of course I didn't let her in. Give those people an inch and they take a yard."

Harry had to restrain a chuckle. Gwen had never been one of life's inch-givers. "Did she say anything about the house?"

"She said they had the right to inspect it. To make sure it was fit for human habitation. I said of course it's fit for human sodding habitation, what did she think I was doing here? She just shook her head and muttered something about compulsory purchase. In the end I slammed the door on her and that was that. She went away with her tail between her legs."

"And you'd like us to drop her a line, tell her to mind her own business?"

"I'm not bothered about a slip of a girl, whatever official papers she waves. But a couple of days later a second feller knocked on my door. A real plug-ugly. Said his name was Quixall and he'd come on behalf of his brother. I told him to forget it, I wasn't moving. But he said he and his brother weren't the sort of men to take no for an answer."

Harry felt a chill. If he hadn't known Gwen better, he would have sworn there was a tremor in her voice. "Go on."

"When I told him they'd have to get used to this 'no,' he laughed at me. Said I was a stubborn old cow and I'd see sense in the end. I wasn't standing for that. I let him have a few choice words and he didn't like it."

Harry could picture the scene. Despite his anxiety on Gwen's behalf, he was amused. The bully boy no doubt believed that ailing old women should be seen and not heard, be frightened and not foul-mouthed. If anyone could convince him he was mistaken, it would be Gwen.

"So what did he say?"

"That I'd be hearing from him."

He could tell there was more to come. "And?"

"You know the thunderstorm we had last night?"

"I won't forget it in a hurry. I got soaked to the skin in the time it took me to run from the office to my car."

"My front porch was awash hours after the rain finally stopped."

"A downpour like that, it's not surprising."

"Listen," she snapped. "It's never happened before. Never. I soon found the reason. Someone had shoved a block of concrete in the drain."

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"Quixall's brother?"

"Who else? So I thought I'd better have a word with you."

"Quite right. Look, give me twenty minutes and I'll be ringing your bell."

"Wait a minute," she said swiftly. "I just wanted to know what I should do. I don't want to be paying fancy fees for the privilege of having you coming round here swallowing my tea and guzzling my biscuits."

"Don't worry, you make such good tea and biscuits, I'll waive any fees. How's that for a deal?"

"You're like the offer to buy me out," she complained. "Too good to be true. I've heard enough about deals in the last few days to last me a lifetime."

"I'll see you soon."

Rapidly, he told Jim what had happened. "Who were the estate agents acting for Quixall?"

"Hywel Yorath and Associates. Not the most reputable firm in Liverpool."

"You said it. I last crossed Yorath's path outside the magistrates court six months ago. He was being prosecuted for a property misdescription. A hazard of the job, he called it."

"He's not careful about the company he keeps," agreed Jim. "The story goes that he's in thick with that well-known public servant, Alan Agriwallah."

Harry winced. "Who is as fine an advertisement for Liverpool politics as Crippen was for the medical profession."

"You're insulting Crippen, even if Agriwallah's voters do think he can do no wrong. But supposing the Quixalls are engaged in a frolic of their own, I still don't like the sound of everything that's been happening to Gwen. What do you intend to do?"

"First things first. I need to see how she is. She may be as strong as the average stevedore, but she is seventy-five. I'd offer to hold her hand for a while, but she'd only put me in an armlock for my cheek."

On his way to Lovelady Lane, Harry thought about her story. It sounded as though the Quixalls were engaged in a classic winkling exercise. First, the nice-as-pie approach. Easy money on offer and every prospect of a happy ending. If that failed, the velvet glove would come off. Harry recalled acting for a couple whose landlord thought nothing of introducing a few rats into his own property to persuade the tenants to vacate so that he could sell for a fat profit.

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What worried him now was the possibility that Alan Agriwallah might be involved. In this city, he was the biggest rat of all.

What were the Quixalls after? Jim's theory was logical, yet Harry could not see how redeveloping a house bought so expensively could generate enough profit to justify putting the screws on Gwen. Of all the old ladies in the world, they had to pick the one most likely to fight. His greatest fear was that at her age it might be a fight to the death.

Was any home worth such a price? Harry didn't find it an easy question to answer. He had no hang-ups about any building: For him, home was his native town. Born and bred in Liverpool, he had heard over the years the hoarse screams of hundreds of paper sellers proclaiming the latest news of the city's crime and corruption, its riots and redundancies. Liverpudlians were no strangers to adversity, but they seldom succumbed for long to self-pity, and Harry knew of no other place whose people had such humour and heart. He had never lived anywhere else and had never wanted to. He could at least understand why Gwen wished to stay put, why she could not contemplate ending her life in any place other than the one she regarded as home.

Lovelady Lane wound between sandstone walls for three-quarters of a mile, leading from high-rise hells to the fringe of Merseyside's green and pleasant spots. As he left the urban ghetto behind, most of the houses he passed were prewar family homes. Gwen's stood almost at the end of the lane before it reached a T-junction with a recently extended dual carriageway.

He parked at the gate and studied the house. A rambling red-brick Victorian edifice, it had probably stood in isolation a century ago in the midst of an agricultural plain. The house next-door, where the Jim Reeves fan had lived, was smaller and more modern with grounds half the size of Gwen's. There was a double gate at the side of her place, but no garage. A weed-choked path led up to the front door and a wide, well-worn dirt track curved around the building and out of sight.

An idea occurred to him and, instead of walking up the path, he followed the track. It went alongside a couple of outbuildings at the rear of the house and skirted the back garden, a jungle of nettles and long grass whose drabness was relieved only by the vivid splashes of colour from a couple of flowering cherry trees in full bloom. Fifty yards behind the house the track passed through a five-barred gate into a large paddock. Harry surveyed the scene.

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As far as he could tell, the paddock was boxed in by other properties. An idea began to form in his mind.

Satisfied, he retraced his steps and hurried towards the front door. It opened before he could press the bell to reveal Gwen's suspicious face.

"What d'you think you're doing, snooping round the back like that? I almost took you for that fellow Quixall. You should be more careful, I was about to take a potshot at you."

Harry stared at what she was holding, scarcely able to credit the evidence of his eyes. "Is that a rifle in your hand?"

"You bet it is. I need to protect myself."

"For God's sake. Even if that gun isn't loaded, put it down."

He followed her into a hall as cold and gloomy as an underground cavern. It would not have surprised him to see stalactites hanging from the ceiling. The furniture was old and dark, the carpet worn and patterned in a fifties style. Damp patches discoloured the walls and a musty smell hung in the air. She turned and looked him in the eye.

"It's loaded, all right. Oiled and ready for firing."

He looked at the hunched figure in front of him. She seemed smaller than before, as if the stresses and strains of the last few days had shrunk her.

"Listen, your name isn't Annie Oakley. Where did you get that thing from?"

With a mutinous glare, she led him into a sitting room and laid the gun on a gateleg table. "It's one of the few things Mitch left me, apart from the kids, the house, and a pile of debts. He was keen on shooting. And he ran a nightclub, remember. Even all those years ago, that was a dangerous game. He reckoned it might come in handy one day—for protection. I started thinking this afternoon that he might have had the right idea."

"Forget it. This is Huyton, not *High Noon.*"

"You've not told me why you were poking your nose round my back garden."

Harry sat next to her on a faded sofa which felt as though it lacked any springs. "I was having a look at your paddock."

Her heavy eyebrows lifted. "Since when have you been interested in paddocks? Besides, it isn't even mine."

"No?" Perhaps his guess had been wrong. "Then who owns it?"

"A farmer named Hinks. Most of his land is on the other side of the new dual carriageway. Mind, the paddock's not been much use

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to him ever since they widened the road."

"I see." And he thought he did. "I presume the farmer has a right of way over your track?"

"Of course, he couldn't get to the field any other way." She spoke as if to a backward child.

"So there's no other access?"

"No. Why do you want to know?"

He ignored the question. "May I use your phone?"

She stared at him. "Please yourself. It's in the kitchen."

He found the farmer's number and got through to Mrs. Hinks. Introducing himself as a property developer, he said, "I gather your husband owns the paddock off Lovelady Lane. I was wondering if he'd be prepared to consider . . ."

"You're too late," the woman said. "He signed a contract of sale only last week."

Harry made an anguished sound. "Don't tell me that Alan Agriwallah has beaten me to it!"

The woman became cautious. "I don't think I can say . . ."

But she had already told him as much as he needed to know. His next call was to Agriwallah's constituency office.

"He's out on business at the moment," a breathless girl informed him. "But his office hours begin at four this afternoon if you want to catch him then. Shall I book you in?"

"The name's Harry Devlin and it's about a housing problem."

"And the address?"

"Lovelady Lane."

"But that's not part of Alan's ward!" She sounded outraged. Her boss prided himself on representing the underprivileged, not the private homeowners of Lovelady Lane.

"Tell him I'm calling on behalf of Mrs. Gwendoline Vandrau. I think he'll be willing to see me."

As he put the phone down, a deafening explosion came from the sitting room. It sounded almost as if Gwen had fired her rifle through the window. He raced next-door and found her backed up against the wall, her face white. The gun was still sitting innocently on the table. Shards of glass covered the floor and in the middle of them sat a fat half-brick with jagged edges.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes." Her voice was hoarse with shock. "I was on my way out to make you that cup of tea you made so much fuss about. How all that glass missed me, I'll never know."

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Harry moved to the shattered window, crunching bits of the old cobwebbed panes underfoot. There was no sign of the person who had thrown the brick. Turning to face her, he said, "One of your married daughters lives in Wirral, doesn't she? Why don't you go and stay with her? At least until all this is sorted out."

Gwen folded her arms. For all her recent suffering, she would still have made the most belligerent bulldog seem like a soft touch. "And let them win?"

"It need only be for a few days."

"I can't leave here."

Harry told himself she was an old woman, tired and unwell. He must be patient. "Of course you can."

"Not on your life!"

"It could be your life next time," said Harry quietly. "The people you're dealing with mean business. The brick was a warning, but next time you may not be so lucky."

"Lucky!" She glared at him. "This is my house and no one is going to drive me out of it. I live in Liverpool, not Chicago."

"For all you and I know, love, Chicago's safer than Liverpool these days. You're better out of the firing line."

She pointed to the rifle. "If there's any firing to be done, I can do it. Mitch taught me how to use that thing."

"Gwen, be serious. I know an Englishwoman's home is her castle, but you can't—"

"I am being serious," she said, looking him in the eye. "You don't understand. This was my home when I was on my own with three squealing infants. I've lived here since I was a young woman who thought she was in love, and I'll die here, sooner or later. If it has to be sooner because of these thugs, so be it. It may be the best way—the doctor's given me some bad news lately. But I'm not moving out. Not for anyone."

"Let me call the police, then."

Her expression was withering. "Much good they'll do. No, if you want to do something for me, speak to this Quixall. Tell him that the only way I'm going out of here is feet first."

She strode over to her favourite armchair, brushed the glass from it with an arthritic hand, sat down, and closed her eyes. The discussion, Harry realised, was over.

"I need to speak to some people," he said. "I'll be back soon. In the meantime, I want you to promise me one thing—that you won't do anything foolish."

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But Gwen Vandrau's eyes remained shut. Harry gazed at her for a moment, reluctant affection mingling with anxiety and exasperation, before walking out and heading for his car.

He stopped at a phone box down the road and called Jim to explain what had happened.

"I suppose the farmer would only have a right of way for agricultural purposes?"

Jim agreed. "The terms will be written into Gwen's deeds. The paddock won't have been worth much to him on that basis. Now that the European Community is ordering farmers to let so much land lie fallow, Hinks will probably have been glad of the chance to sell. He'll know that the local authority won't allow him to build on it."

"But if the buyer owns Gwen's property as well and has a pal on the council's planning committee?"

"A different story altogether. It's not what you own, it's what you know. So you reckon Alan Agriwallah is mixed up in this?"

"Up to his neck. One last thing. Will you call the police? Speak to someone, put them in the picture as far as you need to. Ask them to keep an eye on Gwen's place. I wouldn't like anything to happen to her before I speak to Agriwallah."

"You've got no evidence at all against him."

"Evidence is for the courts. This is just a chat, man-to-man."

"Careful, Harry. He's dangerous to cross. Besides, what do you propose to say to him?"

"I'll think of something."

But Harry hadn't, even by the time he walked into Agriwallah's office. He'd been waiting in a small room on the ground floor of a welfare rights centre in a back street of the inner city. The place was packed with people. One or two stank of drink or dirt; all had a whiff of terminal despair. Yet for those drowning in debt and without a job or a home they could call their own, Alan Agriwallah offered a chance of confronting the odds. If anyone could fight for them, it would be the man everyone in the city knew as AA. His face gazed down from posters pinned to all four walls. It was the face of a strong and swarthy man whose left fist was clenched in the salute that had been his trademark for the past fifteen years. He may have been the son of an Indian seaman and a Dock Road whore, but these days everyone in the Town Hall danced to his tune. For the voters who had made his council seat the safest in England, AA meant more than hope. He was a god.

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Yet Harry knew he had another side. In pubs and clubs throughout the city, people muttered about AA's limousine lifestyle and the security corps he'd recruited from the ranks of the unemployed. Now and then an investigative journalist set out to uncover the truth behind the rumours of twisted arms and crooked deals. But somehow the story always ended up on a spike.

How to challenge such a man on his own home ground? How to accuse him of conspiracy and worse? Harry was still wrestling with this dilemma when he heard his name called and made his way into the inner sanctum.

The man behind the desk didn't ask him to sit down. He considered Harry with a care calculated to induce unease. One thing no one ever suggested was that Alan Agriwallah was a fool.

"I've heard of you, Mr. Devlin. They say you're a good brief, though too often your heart rules your head."

On television or the radio Agriwallah favoured the snappy sound bite in a strong Scouse accent. In private his tone was more measured, crisp yet polite.

"And you'll have recognised the name of my client, Mrs. Vandrau?"

"Can't say I did. But you're a busy man and even if you charge less than other sharks, I'll pay you the compliment of expecting that you're not here to waste time. Which is why I asked you in ahead of my constituents waiting outside who have far more pressing personal problems. So what can I do for you?"

"Two small-time builders, brothers called Quixall, are trying to winkle Gwen Vandrau out of her home. They have their eye on developing a paddock behind the house and they need the access."

"Sorry to hear it. She should contact her local councillor. To say nothing of the police."

"Trouble is, the Quixalls seem to have friends in high places. Or more accurately, one friend in a very high place. I believe that it's you."

Agriwallah's face was a mask. "What makes you think that?"

"You're hand in glove with Yorath, their estate agent. And only someone with clout at the Town Hall could tee up a swift visit from environmental health to pile on the pressure when money didn't talk. I expect you explained there was an old dear out in Lovelady Lane you'd promised to keep an eye on, even though it's not your political patch. Did you shed a few crocodile tears about her not knowing what was best for her and living somewhere unfit for an old

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woman on her own? After Gwen sent the girl off with a flea in her ear, you called in the heavy mob. Blocking her drains, shoving a brick through her window."

Agriwallah fingered an election leaflet headed *Action Not Words.* "Surely you know your law? I could sue you for slander."

"I'd love you to. Though it wouldn't be as lucrative as this deal. The land's large enough for three or four executive detacheds. Too pricey for your constituents, but never mind. If you move fast, you'll be able to stitch up the planning side so as to lift the agricultural-use condition on both paddock and access track."

"And why should I be in such a hurry?"

"I don't know much about politics, though I know what I don't like. Aren't there elections next month? Afterwards, they usually play musical chairs with the various committees. It might take time to push your scheme through then and there's too much money at stake for you to tolerate delay."

Agriwallah walked up to Harry and seized him by the shoulder. "Just what do you want?"

Harry stood his ground. "Gwen Vandrau is an old woman. I also think she's sick and it may be terminal. She wants to stay in her home and that's her right. I want you to call your thugs off her."

He sensed Agriwallah's mind was working fast. The councillor relaxed his grip and looked at his watch. "I could make life rough for you if I wished. I'm not without influence in this city and I don't like being bad-mouthed by a brief who ought to know better. But I'll make allowances for the fact that you're concerned about this client of yours. I've no idea what you're talking about, of course, but if people are bothering the woman, maybe you'd better get a move on back to her place. The kind of people you're talking about don't hang around. At this very moment they may be conducting—direct negotiations with her."

Harry walked to the door, then turned. "I don't want her threatened again."

Agriwallah gave an irritable flip of the hand. "Then why don't you get a move on instead of wasting my time?"

Knowing better than to push his luck, Harry retraced his path through the waiting room. Another name was called and a bare-legged woman with two small children rose to her feet. She looked as though she'd been invited into the grotto by Father Christmas. And in a sense, she had, for Alan Agriwallah had the power to make dreams come true.

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As well as to change lives, reflected Harry, for better or worse. He hoped he'd read Agriwallah's thoughts aright. Like a true politician, Agriwallah had calculated his options in less than a minute and decided to step back from the scam at Lovelady Lane. He'd even given a coded warning that the nastier Quixall was due to pay Gwen a return visit any time now.

Harry didn't deceive himself. There had been no sentiment in Agriwallah's reaction. No one wrote off lightly the kind of money he must have hoped to make through fixing things for the developers with the people in planning. But with local polls in the offing he couldn't risk Harry making waves over the next few weeks. There was talk that he was looking for a safe seat in Parliament come the next general election. He wouldn't dare blot his copybook now. That would give the Party apparatchiks in London who hated provincial upstarts a cast-iron excuse to scratch his name from the shortlist.

Quarter of an hour later, Harry was back in Lovelady Lane. Outside Gwen's gate he saw an unmarked van. Was Quixall here already? There was no sign yet of the police Jim had called. The front door was ajar. He raced up the path, but before he was halfway to the house a muffled sound stopped him in his tracks.

"Gwen! For God's sake, don't fire again! I've talked to the man who's behind the Quixalls. He's seen sense and you're not going to be bothered anymore!"

The only reply was a dreadful moan. As he watched, a big man with a broken nose staggered out of the unlit hall. He was clutching his stomach, but he would have needed three hands to cover the dark patch that stained his bright blue shellsuit.

Gwen Vandrau appeared in the doorway. The rifle was in her hand. Her expression was exultant, yet half-crazed.

"I told you no one would get me out of here alive!"

Quixall sank to the ground. His blood started to dribble down the path.

"Give the gun to me, Gwen."

Harry began to move forward, but she waved him back with the rifle. Then she lifted it again.

"It'd be kinder to finish him off."

"No, Gwen, listen to me. Put the gun down. You don't know what you're doing."

"Of course I do." A dreamy look came into her dark eyes. "Look what I did with the other two. Much as I wanted them to suffer, I put them out of their misery."

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"What are you talking about?"

But, with a sudden sick feeling, Harry realised he knew.

"Mitch and that fancy tart of his, of course. He thought he could kick me out of here and install her in my place."

"You shot them both?"

"And buried them in the garden. You saw the cherry trees flowering out at the back? Prettier than gravestones, I've always thought. But you understand now why I could never leave?"

"Yes, of course."

Harry edged forward, trying not to attract her attention. She seemed even to have forgotten about the thug stretched out in front of her as her mind reached back over the past fifty years.

"Mitch was the only man I ever loved, but when he said he was leaving me, I told him to forget it, I'd never let him go. I said I'd see him in hell first. And maybe I will."

He was within three or four yards of her, calculating when he should make his move. In the distance he heard a police siren and at the same time she noticed he was almost within reach. Once again she raised the rifle.

Harry shut his eyes. The last thing he saw was Gwen's lips, parting in a lovely smile that made her look seventeen rather than seventy-five. He'd never seen her happy before. Then he heard the gun go off and the shock of the explosion threw him to the ground.

After a few moments he lifted his head a fraction and opened his eyes to a sight that made him retch. She must have put the gun in her mouth before firing, for her head had been shattered beyond recognition. She was lying only a few feet away in the shadow of her house, the tumbledown old place that for half a century had been not so much her home as her prison. ●

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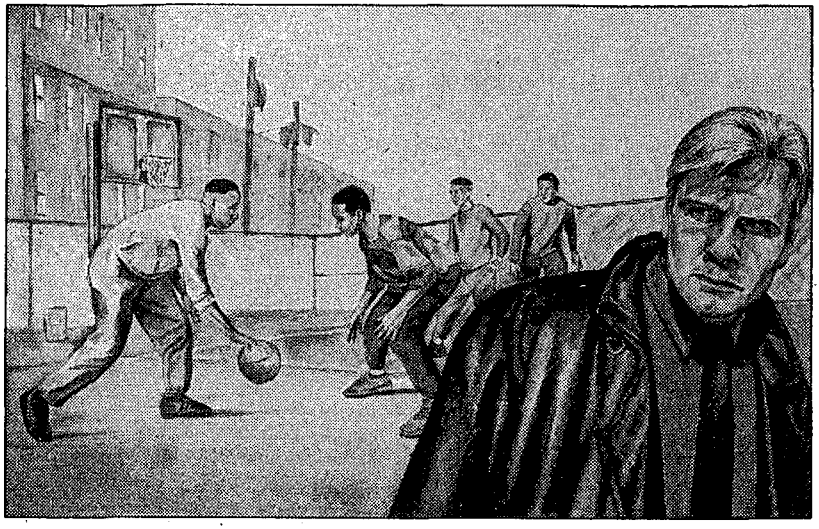

Art by Steve Cavallo

HOOPS

by S. J. Rozan

A cold wind was pulling sharp waves from the Hudson as I drove north, out of town. The waves would strain for height, pushing forward, reaching; but then they'd fall back with small, violent crashes, never high enough, never breaking free.

I was heading to Yonkers, a tired, shabby city caught between New York and the real suburbs. I'd been there over the years as cases had taken me, but I'd never had a client from there before. I'd never had a client who was just eighteen, either. But it was a week since I'd closed my last case. Money was a little tight, I was getting antsy, and working was better than not working, always.

Even working for a relative of Curtis's. I'd been surprised when he'd called me. The ring of the telephone had burst into a practice session where a Beethoven sonata I'd thought I had in my fingers was falling apart, where rhythm, color, texture, everything was off. I usually don't like being interrupted at the piano, but

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this time I jumped at it.

Until I heard who it was, and what he wanted.

"A nephew of yours?" I said into the phone. "I didn't know scum like you had relatives, Curtis."

"Now, you got no call to be insulting," Curtis's smooth voice gave back. "Though it ain't surprising. I told the boy I could get him a investigator do a good job for him, but he gonna have to put up with a lot of attitude."

"What's he done?" I asked shortly.

"Ain't done nothing. A friend of his got hisself killed. Raymond think someone should be paying attention."

"When people get killed the cops usually pay attention."

"Unless you some black kid drug dealer in Yonkers, and you the suicide half of a murder-suicide."

He had a point. "Tell me about it."

He told me. An eighteen-year-old high school senior named Charles Lomax had been found in a park where the kids go at night. His pregnant girlfriend, beside him, had a bullet in her heart. Lomax had a bullet through his head and the gun in his hand.

The bodies had been discovered by the basketball coach, who said he'd gone out looking after Lomax hadn't shown up for practice. He hadn't shown up for class, either, but apparently that wasn't unusual enough for his classroom teachers to be bothered about. Lomax had been a point guard with a C average. He'd been expected to graduate, which distinguished him from about half the kids at Yonkers West. He'd been in trouble with the police all his life, which distinguished him from nobody. There was nothing else interesting about him, except that he'd been a friend of Raymond Coe, and Raymond wasn't happy with the official verdict: murder-suicide, case closed.

S. J. Rozan was born and raised in the Bronx, the setting of her first story for *EQMM*. An architect for a New York City firm, Ms. Rozan's practice includes police stations, firehouses, prisons, and zoos. "Hoops," a hard-hitting private-eye story, employs the protagonist of her 1995 novel *Concourse* (St. Martin's Press). Like her series hero, the author knows the mean streets of New York. She holds a brown belt in Tai Kwon Do and has taught women's self-defense.

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"What's Raymond's theory?" I asked Curtis, shouldering the phone so I could close the piano and stack my music.

"Let me put it to you this way," Curtis oozed. "I ain't suggested the boy hire hisself a honky detective because I admire the way you people dance."

I pulled slowly around the corner, coasted past the cracked asphalt playground I'd been told to find. The late-day air was mean with the wind's cold edge, but six black kids in sweats and high-tech sneakers crowded the concrete half-court. Their game was fast, loud, and physical, elbows thrown and no fouls called. One kid, tall and meaty, had a game on a level the others couldn't match: Faster and smarter both, he muscled his man when he couldn't finesse him. But it didn't stop the rest. No one hung back, no one gave in. Slam dunks and three-pointers flew through the netless rim. They didn't seem to be keeping score.

A kid fell, rolled, jumped up shaking his hand against the sting of a scrape. Without missing a beat he was back in the game. I parked across the street and watched. One of those kids was Raymond; I didn't know which. Right now I knew nothing about any of them, except for what I could see: strength, focus, a wild joy in pushing themselves. I finished a cigarette. In a minute I'd become part of their world. This moment of possibility would end. Knowledge can't be shaken off. And knowledge is always limiting.

The game faltered and then stopped as I walked to the break in the chain-link fence. They all watched me approach, silent. A chunky kid in a hooded sweatshirt shifted the ball from one hand to the other. To the one who'd fallen he said, "Yo, Ray. This your man?"

"Don't know." Raising his voice as though he suspected I spoke a different language, the kid said, "You Smith?"

I nodded. "Raymond Coe?"

"Yeah." He jerked his head at the others. "These my homeboys."

I glanced at the tight, silent group. "They in on this?"

"You got a problem with that?"

"Should I?"

"Maybe you don't like working for a bunch of niggers."

I stared into his dark eyes. It seemed to me they were softer than he might have wanted them to be. "Maybe I don't like having to pass an exam to get a case." I shrugged, turned to go.

"Yo," Raymond said, behind me.

I turned back.

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"Curtis say you good."

"I don't like Curtis," I told him. "He doesn't like me. But we're useful to each other from time to time."

Surprisingly, he grinned. His face seemed, for a moment, to fit with what I'd seen in his eyes. "Curtis tell me you was gonna say that."

"What else did he tell you?"

"That you the man could find out about my man C."

"What's in it for you?"

A couple of the other kids scowled at that, and one started to speak, but Raymond silenced him with a look. "Nothing in it for me," he said.

"I cost money," I pressed. "Forty an hour, plus expenses. Two days up front. Why's it worth it to you?"

The chunky kid slammed the ball to the pavement, snatched it back. "Come on, Ray. You don't need this bull."

Raymond ignored him, looked steadily at me. "C was my main man, my homie. No way he done what they say he done. Somebody burned him. I ain't gonna let that pass."

"Why me?" I asked. "Curtis knows every piece of black slime that ever walked the earth, but he sent you a white detective. Why?"

" 'Cause the slime we looking for," Raymond said steadily, "I don't believe they black."

Raymond, his homies, and I made our way to the end of the block, to the pizza place. The day had gone and a tired gray evening was coming in, studded with yellow streetlights and blinking neon. The homies gave me their names: Ash, Caesar, Skin. Tyrell, the one who could really play. The chunky one, Halftime. None of them offered to shake my hand.

Inside, where the air swirled with garlic and oregano, we crowded around a booth, hauling chairs to the end of the table. Halftime went to order a pizza. He came back distributing Cokes and Sprites, and he brought me coffee. Across the room, from the jukebox, a rap song began, complicated rhythm under complex rhyme, music with no melody. I drank some coffee. "Well?"

Everyone glanced at everyone else, but they all came back to Raymond. Raymond looked only at me. "My man C," he started. "Someone done him, make it look like suicide."

"People kill themselves," I said.

Some heads shook; Tyrell muttered, "Damn."

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"You don't know him," Raymond said. "C don't never give up on nothing. And he had no reason. He was gonna graduate, he was gonna have a kid. The season was just starting."

"The season?" I left the rest for later.

"Hoops," Raymond told me, though it was clear I was straining the patience of the others. "My man a guard. Tyrell, Ash, and me, we on the squad too." Tyrell and Ash, a round-faced quiet kid, nodded in acknowledgment. "The rest of them," Raymond's sudden, unexpected grin flashed again, "they keep us on our game."

"So you're telling me if Lomax was going to kill himself he would have waited until after the season?" I lit a cigarette, shook the match into the tin ashtray.

"Man, I am telling you no way he did that." Raymond's voice was emphatic. "C don't have no reason to want out. Plus, Ayisha. Ain't no way he gonna do her like that, the mother of his baby."

"He wanted the baby?"

Halftime grinned, poked at something on the table. Raymond said, "He already buying it things. Toys and stuff. Bought one of them fuzzy baby basketballs, you know? It was gonna be a boy."

"How was he planning to support a family?"

Raymond shrugged. "Some way. Ayisha, she bragging like he gonna get tapped to play for some big school and they gonna be rich, but she don't believe it neither."

"It wasn't true?"

"Nah." Raymond shook his head. "Only dude around here got that kind of chance be my man Tyrell. He gonna make us famous. Put us on the map."

I turned to Tyrell, who was polishing off his second Coke in the corner of the booth. "I watched you play," I told him. "You're smart and fast. You have offers?"

Tyrell stared at me for a moment before he answered. "Coach say scouts coming this season." His voice was deep, resonant, and slow. "He been talking to them."

Halftime's name rang out; he went to the counter for the pizza. I looked around at the others, at their hard faces and at their eyes. Seventeen, eighteen: They should have been on the verge of something, at the beginning. But these boys had no futures and they knew it; and I could see it, in their eyes.

I didn't ask where the money was coming from to pay me. I didn't want to know. I didn't ask what would happen to Tyrell if he didn't get a college offer, or whether the others, the ones who weren't

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on the squad, were still in school. So what if they were? Where would it get them?

I asked a more practical question. "Who'd want to kill Lomax?"

Raymond shrugged, looked at his homeboys. "Everybody got enemies."

"Who were his?"

"Nobody I know about," he said. "Except the cops."

"Cops?" I looked at Raymond, at the other grim faces. "That's what this is about? You think this was a cop job?"

Halftime came back, with a pizza and a pile of paper plates. Everyone reached for a slice but me; Raymond made the offer but I shook my head.

Raymond didn't answer my question, gave Tyrell a look. Tyrell's deep voice picked it up. "C and me was in a little trouble last year. Gas-station holdup. It was bull. Charges was dropped."

"But them mothers didn't let up," Raymond said impatiently. "Tyrell, nobody care, but C been a pain in the cops' butt for years. You know, up in their face, trash-talking. I tell him, man, back off, you leave them alone and they leave you alone. But he don't never stop. C like to win. Also he like to make sure you know you lose. Cops was all over him after he get out."

"And?"

"And nothing. They couldn't get nothing else on him."

"And?" I said again, knowing what was coming.

"I figure they get tired waiting for him to make a mistake and make it for him."

I pulled on my cigarette. There was nothing left; I stubbed it out. I wanted to tell them they were wrong, they were crazy, that kind of stuff doesn't really go on. But that would be pointless. They might be wrong, in this case, but they weren't crazy and we all knew it.

"Anyone in particular?" I asked.

Raymond shook his head. "Cops around here, they run in packs," he said. "Could be anyone."

Two slices were left on the tray. Without discussion, and seemingly by general consent, Raymond and Tyrell reached for them.

"Okay," I said. "Tell me about her."

Tyrell looked away, as though other things in the room were more interesting than I was.

"Ayisha?" Raymond asked. He seemed to think about my question as he ate. "He can't get enough of her," he finally said.

"But you didn't like her?"

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"Nah, she okay." He flipped a piece of crust onto the tray, sat back, and popped the top of a Sprite. "She sorta—you know. She got a smart mouth. And she been around."

A couple of the other guys snickered. I wondered whom she'd been around with.

"She have enemies?"

"I don't know. But like I say, everybody got them. Can't always tell what you done to get them, but everybody got them."

I left, trading phone numbers with Raymond. I took the homies' numbers too, though I was less than certain that getting in touch with any of them would be as easy as a phone call. But I might want to talk to some of them, separately, later. Now, I wanted to talk to a few other people.

The first, from a phone booth down the street, was Lewis Farlow, the basketball coach who'd found the bodies. I called him at the high school, to find a time he'd be available. Half an hour, he told me. He knew about me; he'd been expecting my call.

Next I called the Yonkers PD, to find the detective on the Lomax case. Might as well get the party line.

He was a high-voiced Irish sergeant named Sweeney. He wasn't impressed with my name or my mission, and he wasn't helpful.

"What's to investigate?" he wanted to know. "That case has already been investigated. By real detectives."

"My client's not sure it was suicide," I said calmly.

"Yeah? Who are you working for?"

"Friend of the family."

"Don't be cute, Smith."

"I'm just asking for the results of the official investigation, Sweeney."

The grim pleasure in Sweeney's voice was palpable. "The official results are, the kid killed the girlfriend. Blam! Then he blew his own brains out. Happy?"

Start out with an easy one. "Whose was the gun?"

"The Pope's."

"You couldn't trace it?"

"No, Smith, we couldn't trace it. Numbers were filed off, inside and out. That a new one on you?"

"Seems like a lot of trouble to go to for a suicide weapon."

"Maybe suicide wasn't on his mind when he got it."

"Why'd he do it?"

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"How the hell do I know why he did it? You suppose it had anything to do with her being pregnant?"

"And what, his reputation would be ruined? Anyway, his friends say he wanted the baby."

"Yeah, sure. Da-da." Sweeney made baby noises into the phone.

"Sweeney—"

"Yeah. So maybe he did. And then maybe he finds out it isn't his. You like that for a motive? It's yours."

"You have any proof of that?"

"No. Matter of fact, I just thought it up. I'll let you in on something, Smith. I got better things to do than bust my hump to prove a kid with his brains in the dirt and the gun in his hand pulled the trigger."

"I understand you guys knew this kid."

"We know them all. Most of them have been our guests for short stays in our spacious accommodations."

"I hear you couldn't hold onto this one."

"What, for that gas-station job?" He didn't rise to the bait. "Way I look at it, it's just as well. If we could hold them all as long as they deserve, the streets would be clean and I'd be out of a job."

"Come on, Sweeney. Didn't it steam you just a little when the kid walked? I hear it wasn't the first time."

"Matter of fact, it wasn't."

"Matter of fact, I hear there were cops who had this kid on a special list. Was he on your list, Sweeney?"

"Now just hold it, Smith. What are you getting at? I killed him because I couldn't keep his ass in jail where it belonged?"

I'd made him mad. Good; angry men make mistakes.

"Not necessarily you, Sweeney. It's just that I'll bet there weren't a lot of tears in the department when Lomax bought it."

"Oh," he said slowly, his voice dangerously soft. "I get it. You're looking for a lawsuit, right?"

"Wrong."

"Crap. The family wants to milk it. You find a hole in the police work, they sue the department. The city settles out of court; it's got no backbone with these people. You drive off in your Porsche and I get pushed out early on half my stinking pension. That's it, right?"

"No, Sweeney, that's not it. I'm interested in what really happened to this kid. That's what any good cop would be interested in, too."

"You know what, Smith? You're lucky I don't know your face.

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Here's some advice for free: Don't let me see it."

The phone slammed down; that was that.

Yonkers West High School filled the entire block, a sulking brick-and-concrete monster whose windows were covered with a tight wire mesh. I asked the security guard at the door the way to the gym. "I'm here to see Coach Farlow," I said.

"You a scout?" he asked after me, as I started down the hall.

"No. You have something worth scouting?"

The guard grinned. "Come back tomorrow, at practice," he said. "You'll see."

I found Lewis Farlow behind his desk in his Athletic Department office, a windowless, cramped, concrete-block space that smelled of liniment, mildew, and sweat. Dusty trophies shared the top of the filing cabinets with papers and old coffee cups. Here and there a towel huddled on the floor, as though too exhausted to make it back through the connecting door to the locker room.

I knocked, checked Farlow out while I waited for him to look up from his paperwork. He was a thin white man, smaller than his players, with deep creases in the sagging skin of his face and sparse, colorless hair that might once have been red.

"Yeah." Farlow lifted his head, glanced over me swiftly with blue eyes that were bright and sharp.

"Smith," I said.

"Oh, yeah. About Lomax, right? Sit down." He gestured to a chair.

"The guard at the door asked me if I was a scout," I said as I moved into the room, trying to avoid the boxes of ropes and balls that should have been somewhere else, if there'd been somewhere else for them to be. "He meant that big guy? Tyrell?"

Farlow nodded. "Tyrell Drum," he said. "Best thing we've had here in years. Everybody's just waiting for him to catch fire. You seen him play?" He looked at me quizzically.

"He was with Raymond Coe just now," I explained. "You have scouts coming down?"

"I already had some stringers early last season. Liked what they saw, but the big guns didn't get a chance to get here while Drum was still playing."

"He didn't play the whole season?"

"Sat it out." One corner of Farlow's mouth turned up in a smile that wasn't a smile.

"Hurt?"

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"In jail."

"Oh," I said. "The gas-station job?"

"You heard about that?"

"He told me. It was him and Lomax, right?"

"They say it wasn't either of them. Charges were eventually dropped, but the season was over by then."

"Did he do it?"

"Who the hell knows? If he didn't, he will soon. Or something like it. Unless he gets an offer. Unless he gets out of here. Look, Smith: about this Lomax thing."

Farlow stopped, turned a pencil over in his fingers as though looking for a way to say what he wanted. I waited.

"The guys are pretty upset," Farlow said. "Especially Coe; he and Lomax were pretty tight. Coe's got this half-assed idea that the cops killed Lomax. He's sold it to the rest of them. They told me they were going to hire a private eye to prove it."

"How come they told you?"

"I'm the coach. High school, that's like a father confessor. Wasn't it that way when you were there?"

"The high school I went to, all the kids were white."

"You surprised they talk to me? They gotta talk to someone." He shrugged. "I'm on their side and they know it. I go to bat for them when they're in trouble. I bully them into staying in school. Coe wouldn't be graduating if it weren't for me."

He threw the pencil down on the desk, slumped back in his chair. "Not that I know why I bother. They stay in school, so what? They end up fry cooks at McDonald's." Farlow paused, rubbed a hand across his square chin; I got the feeling he was only half talking to me. "Eighteen years in this hole," he went on, "watching kids go down the drain. No way out. Except every now and then, a kid like Drum comes along. Someone you could actually do something for. Someone with a chance. And the stupid sonuvabitch spends half his junior year in jail."

He looked at me. The half-grin came back. "Sorry, Smith. I get like this. The old coach, feeling sorry for himself. Let's get back to Lomax. Where the hell was I?"

"The guys came to you," I said. "They told you they wanted a P.I."

"Yeah. So I told them to go ahead. Coe's like Lomax was, a stubborn bastard. Easier to agree with than to cross. So I said go ahead, call you. He probably thinks I think he's right, that there's something fishy here. But I don't."

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"What do you think?"

"I think the simple answer is the best. Sometimes it's hard, but it's the best. Lomax killed the girl and he killed himself."

"Why?"

"Some beef, I don't know. Old days, he'd have knocked her around, then gone someplace to cool off. Today, they all have guns. You get mad, someone's dead before you know it. By the time he realizes what he's done it's over. Then? She's dead, the baby's dead, what's he gonna do? He's still got the gun."

He reached for the pencil again, turned it in his hand, and watched it turn.

"A guy's best friend turns up dead," he said in a quiet voice, "he wants to do something. Hiring you makes them feel better. Okay." He looked up. "So what I'm asking you is, go through the motions. You gotta do that; they're gonna pay you for it. But try to wrap it up fast. The sooner they put this behind them the better off they'll be."

I had my own doubts about how easy it ever was to put a friend's death behind you, but that didn't make Farlow wrong.

"If there's nothing to find, I'll know that soon enough," I said.

Farlow nodded, as though we'd reached an agreement. I asked him, "You found the bodies?"

"Yeah." He threw the pencil down again.

"What did it look like?"

"Look like?"

"Tell me what you saw."

Farlow's bright eyes fixed me. He paused, but if he had a question he didn't ask it.

"She's lying on her back. Just this little spot of blood on her chest; but God, her eyes are open." He stopped, licked his dry lips. "Him, he's maybe six feet away. Side of his head blown off. Right side; gun's in his right hand. What do you need this for?"

"It's the motions," I said. "What kind of gun?"

"Automatic. Didn't the police report tell you?"

"They won't let me see it."

"Jesus, don't tell Coe that. Is that normal?"

"Actually, yes. Usually you can get someone to tell you what's in it, but I rubbed the detective on the case the wrong way."

"Jim Sweeney? Everything rubs him the wrong way."

"How about Lomax?"

"You mean, Coe's theory? There's not a cop in Yonkers who wouldn't have thrown a party if they could make something stick to

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Lomax. Backing off wasn't something he knew how to do. They all hated him. But I don't think Sweeney any more than anyone else."

"Tell me about Lomax. Was he good?"

"Good?" Farlow looked puzzled; then he caught on. "Basketball, you mean? He was okay. He could wear better guys out, is what he could do. He'd get up for balls he couldn't reach and shoot shots he couldn't make, even after the bell. He was everywhere, both ends of the floor. Bastard never gave up."

"Did he have a future in the game?"

"Lomax? No." There was no doubt in Farlow's voice. "Eighteen years in this place, I've only seen two or three that could. Drum is the best. An NCAA school could make something out of him. Right school could get him to the NBA. Even the wrong school would get him out of here." I thought back to the concrete playground, to the eyes of the boys around the pizza-parlor table. Here, I had to admit, was a good place to get out of. "But Lomax? No."

"About the girlfriend," I said. "Had you heard anything about trouble between them?"

"No. She had a rep, you know. But all the guys seemed to think she'd quieted down since she took up with Lomax."

"Who'd she been with before?"

"Don't know."

"Do you know anyone with a reason to kill Lomax, or the girl?"

He sighed. "Look," he said. "These kids, they talk big, they look bad, but these are the ones who're trying. Coe, Drum, even Lomax—still in school, still trying. Like something could work out for them." He spread his hands wide, showing me the shabby office, the defeated building, the dead-end lives. "But me, all my life I've been a sucker. My job, the way I figure, is to do my damndest to help, whenever it looks like something might. That's your job too, Smith. You're here because it makes Coe feel like a man, avenging his buddy. That helps. But you're not going to find anything. There's nothing to find."

"Okay." I stood. I was warm; the air felt stuffy, old. I wanted to be outside, where the air moved, even with a cold edge. I wanted to be where everything wasn't already over. "Thanks. I'll come back if I need anything else."

"Sure," he answered. "And come see Drum play Saturday."

Seeing the family is always hard. People have a thousand different ways of responding to loss, of adjusting to their grief and the sudden

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new pattern of their lives. A prying stranger on a questionable mission is never welcome; there's no reason he should be.

Charles Lomax's family lived in a tan concrete project about half a mile from the high school. There were no corridors. The elevators went to outdoor walkways; the apartments opened off them. The door downstairs should have been locked, but the lock was broken, so I rode up to the third floor, picked my way through kids' bikes and folding beach chairs to the apartment at the end.

The wind and the air were cold as I waited for someone to answer my ring, but the view was good, and the apartments' front doors were painted cheerful colors. Here and there beyond the doors I could hear kids' voices yelling and the thump of music.

"Yes, can I help you?" The woman who opened the door was thin, tired-looking. She wore no makeup, and her wrists and collarbone were knobby under her shapeless sweater. Her hair, pulled back into a knot, was streaked with gray. It wasn't until I heard her clear soft voice that I realized she was probably younger than I was.

Electronic sirens came from the TV in the room behind her. She turned her head, raised her voice. "Darian, you turn that down."

The noise dropped a notch. The woman's eyes came back to me.

"Mrs. Lomax?" I said. "I'm Smith. Raymond Coe said you'd be expecting me."

"Raymond." She nodded slightly. "Come in."

She closed the door behind me. Warm cooking smells replaced the cold wind as we moved into the living room, where a boy of maybe ten and a girl a few years older were flopped on the sofa in front of the TV. An open door to the left led into a darkened bedroom. On the wall I glimpsed a basketball poster, Magic Johnson calling the play.

Charles Lomax's mother led me to a paper-strewn table in one corner of the living room, offered me a chair. "Claudine," she called to the girl on the sofa, "come and get your homework. Don't you leave your things around like that." The girl pushed herself reluctantly off the pillows. She looked me over with the dispassionate curiosity of children; then, fanning herself with her papers, she flopped onto the floor in front of the TV.

Sitting, Mrs. Lomax turned to me and waited, with the tired patience of a woman who's used to waiting.

"I'm sorry to bother you," I began. "But Raymond said you might answer some questions for me."

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"What kind of questions?"

I looked over at the children, trying to judge whether the TV was loud enough to keep this discussion private. "Raymond doesn't think Charles killed himself, Mrs. Lomax."

"I know," she said simply. "He told me that. I think he just don't want to think it."

"Then you don't agree with him?"

She also looked to the children before she answered. "Raymond knew my boy better than I did. If he says someone else had more reason to kill Charles than Charles had, might be he's right. But I don't know." She shook her head slowly.

"Mrs. Lomax, did Charles have a gun?"

"I never saw one. I guess that don't mean he didn't have one."

A sudden sense of being watched made me glance toward the sofa again. My eyes caught the boy's; the girl was intent on the TV. The boy turned quickly back to the set, but not before Mrs. Lomax lifted her chin, straightened her shoulders. "Darian!" The boy didn't respond. "Darian," she said again, "you come over here."

Darian sullenly slipped off the sofa, came over, eyes watching the floor. His sister remained intent on the car chase on TV.

"Darian," his mother said, "Mr. Smith asked a question. Did you hear him?"

Hands in the pockets of his oversized jeans, the boy scowled and shrugged.

"He asked did your brother have a gun."

The boy shrugged again.

"Darian, if you know something you ain't saying, you're about to be in some serious kind of trouble. Did you ever see your brother with a gun?"

Darian kicked at a stray pencil, sent it rolling across the floor. "Yeah, I seen him."

I looked at Mrs. Lomax, then back to the boy. "Darian," I said, "do you know where he kept it?"

Without looking at me, Darian shook his head.

"You sure?" said his mother sharply.

" 'Course I'm sure."

Mrs. Lomax looked closely at him. "Darian, you know anything else you ain't saying?"

"No, 'course not," Darian growled.

"If I find you do . . ." she warned. "Okay, you go back and sit down."

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Darian spun around, deposited himself on the sofa, arms hugging his knees.

I turned back to Mrs. Lomax. "Can I ask you about Ayisha?"

She shrugged.

"Did you like her?"

"Started out I did. She was smart to her friends, but she was polite to me. I remember her when she was small, too. Bright little thing .... But after I found out what she did, no, I didn't like her no more."

"Do you mean getting pregnant?" I asked.

She frowned, as though I were speaking a foreign language she was having trouble following. "Not the baby," she said. "The baby wasn't the problem. Though she didn't have no right to go and do that, after she knew. You got to see I blame her. She killed my son."

"Mrs. Lomax, I don't understand. According to the police, your son killed *her,* and himself."

"Oh, well, he pulled the trigger. But they was both already dead. And that innocent baby, too."

"I don't get it."

"Raymond didn't tell you?" Her eyes, fixed on mine, hardened with sudden understanding, and the realization that she was going to have to tell me herself. "She gave him AIDS."

Back on the winter street, I dropped a quarter in a pay phone, watched a newspaper skid down the walk, and waited for Raymond.

"Your buddy Charles was HIV positive," I said when he came on. "Did you know that?"

A short pause, then Raymond's voice, belligerent around the edges. "Yeah, I knew it."

"And his girlfriend, too."

"Uh-huh."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"What difference do it make?"

"Sounds like a motive to me."

"What you talking about?"

"Hopelessness," I told him. "Fear. Not wanting to wait around to die. Not wanting to watch his son die."

"Oh, man!" Raymond snorted a laugh. "C didn't care. He say he never feel better. He tell me it gonna be years before he get sick. Not even gonna stop playing or nothing, even if it do piss Coach off. Just 'cause you got the virus don't mean you sick, you know," he pointed out with a touch of contempt. "You as ignorant as some of them 'round here."

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"What does that mean?"

"Some of the homies, they nervous 'round C when they find out he got the virus. Talking about he shouldn't be coming 'round. Like Ash, don't want to play if C stay on the squad. I had to talk to that brother. But C just laugh. Say, some people ignorant. Don't pay them no mind, do what you be doing. Maybe someday I get sick, he say, but by then they have a cure."

"Goddamn, Raymond," I breathed. I stuck a cigarette in my mouth, lit it to keep from saying all the angry things I was thinking, things about youth, strength, arrogance not lasting, about consequences, about decisions closing doors behind you. I took a deep drag; it cleared my head. Not your business, Smith. Stick to what Raymond hired you for. "All right: Ayisha," I said. "Who else was she with?"

"Ayisha? She been with a lot of guys." Raymond paused. "You thinking some jealous dude gonna come after C and Ayisha 'cause they together?"

"It happens."

"Oh, man! Ain't no homie done this. Black man do it, it be straight up. Coming with this suicide bull, this some crazy white man. That why you here. See," he said, unexpectedly patient, trying to explain something to me, "C and me and the crew, we tight. Like . . ." He paused, reaching for an analogy I'd understand. "Like, you on a squad, maybe you don't like a brother, but you ain't gonna trip him when he got the ball. You got something to say to him, you go up in his face. You do what you gotta do, and you take what you gotta take."

Uh-huh, I thought. If life were like that.

"Okay, Raymond. I'll call you."

"Yeah, man. Later."

I turned up the collar of my jacket; the wind was blowing harder now, off the river. You could smell the water here, the openness of it, the movement and the distance. To me there had always been an offer in that, and a promise: Elsewhere, things are different. Somewhere, not here, lives are better; and the water connects that place and this.

That offer, that promise, probably didn't mean much to Raymond and his buddies. This was what they had, and, with a clear-eyed understanding I couldn't argue with, they knew what it meant.

Except Tyrell Drum, of course. "Offer" meant something different

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to him, but maybe not all that different: a chance to start again, to climb out of this and be somewhere else.

I started back to my car. I was cold and hungry, and down. I'd been buying into Raymond's theory. A conspiracy, the Power bringing down a black kid because they couldn't get him legally and they knew they could get away with it. I'd bought into it because I'd wanted to. Wanted to what, Smith? Be the righteous white man, the one on their side? The part of the Power working for them? Offering them justice, this once, so the world wouldn't look so bad to them? Or so it wouldn't look so bad to you? So you could sleep at night, having done your bit for the oppressed. Terrific.

But now it was different. Lomax had a motive, and a good one, if you asked me. Teenage swagger can plunge into despair fast. One bad blood test, one scarey story about how it feels to die of AIDS: Something like that could have been enough. Especially if he really loved Ayisha. Especially if he already loved his son.

Running footsteps on the pavement behind me made me spin around, ready. The electricity in my skin subsided when I saw who it was.

"Mister, wait." The voice was small and breathless. Jacket open, pink backpack heavy over her arm, Claudine Lomax stopped on the sidewalk, caught her breath. She regarded me with suspicion.

"Zip your jacket," I said. "You'll freeze."

She glanced down, then did as she was told, pulling up her hood and tucking in her braids. She narrowed her eyes at me. "Mister, you a cop?"

"No," I said. "I'm a private detective."

"Why you come around asking questions like that?"

I thought for a moment. "Raymond asked me to. There were some things about Charles he wanted to know."

She bit her lower lip. "You know Raymond?"

"I'm working for him."

"Raymond was Charles friend."

"I know."

She nodded; that seemed to decide something for her. Looking me in the eye, she said, "You was asking Mama about Charles gun."

"That's right. I was asking where he kept it. Do you know?"

"Yeah. And so do Darian. He gonna kill me when he find out it gone. But he just a *kid*. I been crazy worried about this ever since Charles . . ." She trailed off, looking away; then she lifted her head

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and straightened her shoulders, her mother's gesture. Putting her backpack on the ground with exaggerated care, she pulled a paper bag from it, thrust it at me. "Here."

"What's this?" It was heavy and hard and before I looked inside I knew the answer.

"I don't want it in the house. Mama don't know nothing about it. I don't want it where Darian can get it. He think he stepping like a man, gonna take care of business. Make me laugh, but he got this. Boys like that all the time, huh?"

"Yeah," I said. "Boys are like that all the time."

"I thought Charles took it with him. Meeting some guy at night like that. But he must have—he must have had another one, huh?"

"Maybe," I said carefully. "Claudine, what do you mean, 'meeting some guy at night'?"

"Charles don't like to go do his business without his piece. But maybe it wasn't business," she said thoughtfully. " 'Cause usually he tell Ayisha stay home when he taking care of business."

I asked her, "What guy was Charles meeting? Do you know?"

"Uh-uh. He just say he gotta go meet some guy, and Ayisha say she want to come. So Charles say okay, she could keep him company. Then he tell me I better be in bed when he get back, 'cause I got a math test the next day and he gonna beat my butt if I don't pass." In a small voice she added, "I passed, too."

I opened the bag, looked without taking the gun out. It was a long-barreled .32. "Claudine, how long had Charles had this?"

"About a year."

"How did you know he had it?"

"I hear him and Tyrell hiking on each other when he got it. Tyrell say it a old-fashioned, dumb kind of piece, slow as shit. Oh." She covered her mouth with her hand. "Sorry. But that what Tyrell say."

"It's okay, Claudine. What did Charles say?"

"He laugh. He say, by the time Tyrell get his fancy piece working, he gonna find out some guy with a old-fashioned dumb piece already blowed his head off, every time."

She stared at me under the yellow streetlights, a skinny twelve-year-old kid in a jacket not warm enough for a night like this.

"Claudine," I said, "did Charles and Tyrell argue a lot?"

"I hear them trash-talking all the time," she answered. "But I don't think nothing of it. Boys do that, don't they?"

"Yeah," I said. "They do."

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Tyrell, then. Claudine told me where to go; I drove over. Tyrell Drum lived with his family in a run-down wood-frame house with a view of the river in the distance and the abandoned GM plant closer in. Towels were stuffed around the places where the warped windows wouldn't shut. The peeling paint had faded to a dull gray.

My knock was answered by a young boy with hooded eyes who left me to shut the door behind myself as I followed him in. From the room to the left I heard the canned laughter of a TV game show; from upstairs, the floor-shaking boom of a stereo. "Tyrell be in the basement," the boy told me, pointing without interest to a door under the stairs.

"Who's that?" a woman's voice called from above as I opened that door, headed down.

"Man to see Tyrell," the boy answered, and the household went about its business.

The basement was a weight room. The boiler and hot-water tank had been partitioned off into dimness. On this side of the partition were bright fluorescent lights, mats, weights, jump ropes. The smell of damp concrete mixed with the smell of sweat; the hum of the water heater was punctuated by grunts. Tyrell was on the bench, working his left biceps with what looked like sixty pounds. He lifted his eyes to me when I came down, but he didn't move his head out of position, and he finished his set. He was shirtless. His muscles were mounds under his glinting skin.

When he was done, he clanked the weights to the floor, ran a towel over his face.

"Yeah?" he said. He took in air in deep, controlled breaths.

"I want to talk about Ayisha," I said. "And Lomax."

"Go ahead." He kept his eyes on me for a few moments. Then, straightening, he picked up the weights with the other hand, started pumping. "Talk."

"She was your girl once, wasn't she?"

He smiled, didn't break his rhythm. "She been everyone's girl once."

"Maybe everyone didn't care."

"Maybe not." Nineteen, twenty. He put the weights down, left the bench, moved over to a Universal machine. He loaded it to 210, positioned himself, started working the big muscles in his thighs.

"But you did."

He stopped, looked at me. He held the weights in position while he spoke. "Yeah. I cared. I was so glad get rid of her and C at the same

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time I coulda went to Disney World." Slowly, in total control, he released the weights. He relaxed but didn't leave the seat, getting ready for his next set.

"What does that mean, get rid of them?"

Either he really had no idea what I was getting at, or he was a terrific actor. "Didn't have no time for her." Pump, breathe. "For him neither. C always got something going, some idea." Hold. Release, relax. "Always talking at you. Get me confused. Lost my whole last season because of him."

"The gas-station job was his idea?"

He gave me a sly grin. "Charges was dropped." He strained against the weights again. "C talking about, only way to make it be stealin' and dealin'." Pump, release, pump. "I try that, ain't no good at it. Now Coach be telling me—" pump, breathe "—say, I got a chance, a real chance. But I ain't got all the time in the world. Got to do it now, you understand?"

He looked at me. I didn't respond.

"C, he don't never shut up. Don't give a man no chance to think." Hold, release, relax. He swung his legs off the machine, picked up the towel again, wiped his face. "C don't like to think. Don't like it quiet. Dude get nervous if horns ain't honking and sirens going by." He laughed. "Surprise me him and Ayisha end up where they do."

"Meaning?"

"C don't never go to the park. They got nothing there but trees and birds, he say. What I'm gonna do with them?"

"His sister says he was going to meet someone that night."

Tyrell shrugged. He put his legs back in position, started another set.

"And that was it?" I said. "You were through with Lomax and his ideas? You weren't helping him take care of business anymore?"

This time he ran the set straight through before he answered. When he was done, he looked at me, breathing deeply.

"Coach be talking at me, I'm seeing college, the NBA, hotels and honeys and dudes carrying my suitcase. C up in my face, I'm looking at the inside of Rikers. Now what you think I'm gonna do?"

"And that was what you thought of when Lomax took up with Ayisha?"

"Damn sure. They both out my face now, I can take care my business."

"Your business," I mused. "You have a gun, right? An automatic. Can I see it?"

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"What the hell for?"

"Lomax was a revolver man, wasn't he?" I asked conversationally. "He had a .32."

Tyrell shook his head in mild disbelief. "Man, Wyatt Earp coulda carried that piece."

"Why do you carry yours, Tyrell?"

"Now why the hell you think I carry mine?" He scowled. "You some kind of detective, can't figure out why a man got to be strapped 'round here?"

"Is it like that around here?" I asked softly. "A man has to have a gun?"

"God*damn!*" Tyrell exploded. "You think I like that? Watching my back just whenever I'm walking? Can't be going here, can't be going there, you got beef or your homies got beef and someone out to get you for it, go to school, everybody packing, just in case. You think I like that?" A sharp pulse throbbed in his temples; his eyes were shining and bitter. "Man, you can forget about it! I'm gonna make it, man. I'm gonna be all that. C, he got this idea, that idea, don't never think about what come next, what gonna happen 'cause of what he do. I tell him, you got Ayisha, now get out my face, leave me be. I got things to do."

His hard eyes locked on mine. The stereo, two floors up, sent down a pounding, recurring shudder that surrounded us.

"Tyrell," I said, "I'd like to see your gun."

For a moment, no reaction. Then a slow smile. He sauntered over to a padlocked steel box on the other side of the room. He ran the combination, creaked the top open, lifted out a .357 Coonan automatic. Wordlessly he handed it to me.

"How long have you had this?" I asked.

"Maybe a year."

"You sure you didn't just get it?"

He looked at me without an answer. Then, climbing the stairs to where he could reach the door, he opened it and yelled, "Shaun!" He paused; then again, "Shaun! Haul your ragged ass down here!"

The boy with the hooded eyes appeared in the doorway. "You calling me, Tyrell?" he asked tentatively.

Tyrell moved aside, motioned him downstairs. The boy, with an unsure look at me, started down. He walked like someone trying not to take up too much room.

"Shaun, this my piece?"

The boy looked at the gun I held out. "Yeah," he said. "I guess."

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"Don't be guessing," Tyrell said. "This my piece, or ain't it?"

The boy gave Tyrell a nervous look, then peered more closely at the gun, still without touching it. "Yeah," he said. "It got that thing, here."

"What thing?" I asked. I looked where the boy pointed. A wide scrape marred the shiny stock.

Tyrell said, "Shaun, where that come from?"

Shaun answered without looking at Tyrell. "I dropped it."

"When?"

"Day you got it."

"What happen?"

"You mean, what you do?"

"Yeah."

The kid swallowed. "You be cursing at me and you smack me."

"Broke your nose, didn't I?"

The kid nodded.

"So you remember that day pretty good, huh?"

"Yeah."

"When was that?"

"About last year."

"You touched it since?"

"No, Tyrell." The kid looked up quickly.

"Good. Now get the hell out of here."

Shaun scuttled up the stairs and closed the door behind him.

"See?" Tyrell, smiling, took the gun from me. "My heat. Had it a year. How about that?"

"That's great, Tyrell," I said. "It must be great to be so tough. Two more questions. Where were you the night Lomax and Ayisha died?"

"Me?" Tyrell answered, still smiling, looking at the gun in his hand. "I was here."

"Can you prove that?"

"Depends. You could see if my two cousins remember. I went to bed early. Coach say discipline make the difference. You got to be able to do what need to be done, whether you want to or not."

"Uh-huh. You're a model citizen, Tyrell. One more thing. Did you know Lomax was HIV positive?"

Tyrell shrugged, locked his gun back in the box.

"Did it bother you? Friend of yours, with a disease like that?"

"Uh-uh," he said. "Don't got no time to worry about C. He got his troubles, I got mine."

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I drove south, found Broadway, stopped at a tavern near the Bronx line. It was a half-empty place, the kind where dispirited old-timers nurse watery drinks and old grudges. In a scarred booth I lit a cigarette, worked on a Bud. I thought about Raymond, about the simple desire to do something, to try to help. About wanting justice, wanting what's right.

Of course, that meant so many things. To Sweeney it could mean taking a taunting, slippery drug dealer out of the picture. To Tyrell Drum it could mean getting rid of a smooth-talking, dangerous distraction. To Lomax himself, it might have meant having the last laugh: not cheating death, but choosing it, choosing your time and your way and your pain. None of these kids had ever had a lot of choices. This was one Lomax could have given himself.

But I didn't like it.

I had a couple of reasons, but the biggest was what Raymond had instinctively felt: Lomax wasn't the type.

I hadn't known Lomax, but the picture I'd gotten of him was consistent, no matter where it came from. Suicide is for when you give up. Lomax never gave up. Taunting cops. Trying to fast-talk Tyrell into his kind of life. Going up for balls he couldn't reach and shooting shots he couldn't make. That's what the coach said.

Even after the bell.

I lit another cigarette, seeing in my mind the asphalt playground in the fading light, watching the kids charge and jump, hearing the sound of the pounding ball and of their shouts. I saw one fall—I knew now it was Raymond—roll to his feet, try to shake off the sting of the scrape on his hand. Then, immediately, he was back in the game.

Even after the bell.

Suddenly I was cold. Suddenly I knew.

Wanting justice, wanting to help.

There was something else that could mean.

The next day, late afternoon again. The same gray river, the same cold wind.

It would have been pointless to go earlier. I would have been guessing, then, where to look; at this hour, I knew.

I'd made one phone call, to Sweeney, just to check what I already was sure of. He gave me what I wanted, and then he gave me a warning.

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"I'm giving you this because I know you'll get it one way or another. But listen to me, Smith: Whatever road you're heading down, it's a dead end. The first complaint I hear, you'll get a look up close and personal at the smallest cell I can find. Do I make myself clear?"

I thanked him. The rest of the day, I worked on the Beethoven. It was getting better, slowly, slowly.

Yonkers West loomed darker, bigger, more hostile than before. At the front door I greeted the guard.

"You were here yesterday." He grinned. "Go on, tell me you're not a scout."

"Practice in session?" I asked.

"Uh-huh. Go on ahead. I'm sure Coach won't mind."

I wasn't. But I went.

The gym echoed with the thump of the basketball on the maple. The whole team, starters and bench, was out on the floor, practicing a complicated high-low post play. They were rotating through it, changing roles so that each man would understand it in his gut, know how each position felt; but in play, the point would be to get the ball to the big man. To Tyrell. As many times as the play was called, that's how it would end up. Tyrell shooting, Tyrell carrying the team's chances, carrying everyone's hopes.

Coach Farlow was standing on the sideline. He watched the play as they practiced it, following everyone's moves, but especially Tyrell's. I walked the short aisle between the bleachers, came and stood next to him.

He glanced at me, then turned his eyes back to his players. "Hi," he said. "Come to watch practice?"

"No," I said. "I came to talk."

He looked over at me again, then blew the whistle hanging around his neck. "All right, you guys!" The sweating players stopped, stood wiping their faces with their shirts, catching their breath. He rattled off two lists of names. Four guys headed for the sidelines; two teams formed on the court. Raymond, on one end of the floor, caught my eye. I nodded noncommittally. The others looked my way, curious, but snapped their attention back to Farlow when he shouted again.

"Okay, let's go," he called. "Hawkins, take the tip. You and Ford call it."

One of the guys who'd been on his way off the court chased down the ball. Another trotted over to take the coach's whistle. The ball was tossed up in the center of the circle; the game began.

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"You let them call games often?" I asked Farlow, as he stood beside me, following their movements with his sharp blue eyes.

"It's good for them. Forces them to see what's going on. Makes them take responsibility. Most of them get pretty good at it."

I said, "I'll bet Lomax wasn't."

"Lomax? He used to tick them all off. He'd call fouls on everyone, right and left. Just to throw his weight around."

"Did you stop him?"

Farlow watched Raymond go for a lay-up and miss it. Tyrell snatched the rebound, sank it easily. Farlow said, "The point is for them to find out what they're made of. What each other's made of. Doesn't help if I stop them."

"Besides," I said, "you couldn't stop Lomax, could you?"

This time his attention turned to me, stayed there. "What do you mean?"

"No one could ever stop Lomax from doing whatever he wanted. No matter how dangerous it was, to him or anyone else. He wouldn't stop playing, would he?"

"What?"

"That was it, wasn't it? He had AIDS and he wouldn't stop playing."

A whistle blew. Silence, then the slap of sneakers on wood, the thump of the ball as the game went on. Farlow's eyes stayed on me.

"You couldn't talk him out of it," I said. "You couldn't drop him, because he was too good. You'd have had to explain why, and the law protects people from that kind of thing. He'd have been back on the court and you'd have been out of a job.

"But you couldn't let him keep playing. That could have ruined everything."

Shouts came from the far end of the court as Tyrell stole a pass, broke down the floor, and dunked it before anyone from either team got near him.

"Could have ruined what?" Farlow asked in a tight, quiet voice.

"You're going through the motions," I said. "You know I have it. But all right, if you want to do that."

I watched the game, not Farlow, as I continued. "If Lomax had stayed on the team there might have been no season. Some of his own buddies didn't want to play with him. Guys get hurt in this game. They bleed, they spit, they sweat. The other guys were afraid.

"That's what happened to Magic Johnson: He couldn't keep play-

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ing after everyone knew he had AIDS because guys on other teams were afraid to play against him. Magic had class. He didn't force it. He retired.

"But that wasn't Lomax's way, was it? Lomax felt fine and he was going to play. And if it got out he had AIDS his own teammates might have rebelled. So would the teams you play against. The whole season would have collapsed.

"That's what you were afraid of. Losing the season. Losing Drum's last chance."

We stared together down the court, to where a kid was getting set to take a foul shot.

"Lomax killed himself," Farlow said, harshly and slowly. "He took his gun and shot his girl and shot himself."

I said, "I have his gun."

"He had more than one. He bragged about it."

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe not. But the one I have is a revolver. Guys who like revolvers—I'm one—like them because they're dependable. You can bury a revolver in the mud for a month and it'll fire when you pull it out. Lomax was like that about this gun. There've been times when I've had to carry an automatic, and it always makes me nervous. Even if I owned one, it's not the gun I'd take if I were going out to shoot myself."

Farlow said nothing, watching his kids, watching the game.

"Then there are the guys who like automatics," I said. "They're fast. They're powerful. That's what you have, isn't it?"

"Me?" Farlow tried to laugh. "You're kidding. A gun?"

"An automatic," I said. "Same make and model as the one that killed Lomax and Ayisha. Drum got me thinking about it. He said everyone around here was packing. I started to wonder who 'everyone' was. I checked your permit with Sweeney. He told me about it, and said if I harassed you he'd throw me in jail. Does he know?"

The ball was knocked out of bounds, near us. The officials and players organized themselves, resumed the game. The ball flew out again almost immediately. Another whistle blew, play began again.

"No," Farlow said quietly.

We watched together in silence for a while. Some of the ball handling was sloppy, but the plays were smart, and every player played flat out, giving the game everything he had.

"Not every coach can get this from his players," I said.

Farlow asked, "How did you know?"

"Little things. They all clicked together. The gun. The fact that

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Lomax didn't like the park."

"Didn't like the park?" Farlow said. "A guy might pick a place he doesn't like, to die in."

"Sure. But his coach wouldn't think to go looking for him there, unless he had some reason to think he might be there."

Farlow didn't answer. He glanced at the clock on the gym wall; then he stepped onto the court, clapped his hands, and bellowed, "All right, you guys! Looking good. Showers! Stay and wait. I'll talk to you afterwards."

The kid with the whistle brought it back to the coach; the kid with the ball sent it Farlow's way with a bounce pass. Raymond raised his eyebrows as he went by on his way to the locker room. I shook my head.

Farlow watched them go. When the door swung shut behind them he stayed unmoving, as though he were still watching, still seeing something.

"One kid," he said, not talking to me. "One chance. Year after year, you tear your heart out for these kids and they end up in the gutter. Then you get one kid with a way out, one chance. Drum's ready, but he's weak. Not physically. But he can't keep his head in the game. If he loses this season too, there'll be nothing left. He'll hold up another damn gas station, or something. It has to be now."

"Lomax was eighteen," I said. "Ayisha was seventeen. She was pregnant."

"They were dead!" The coach's eyes flashed. "They were dead already. How many years do you think they were going to have? Baby born with AIDS, it wouldn't live through Drum's pro career."

"You did them a favor?"

He flinched. "No." His voice dropped. "That's not what I mean. But Drum—so many people are waiting for this, Smith. And they were already dead."

I needed a cigarette. I lit one up; the coach didn't try to stop me.

"You asked him to meet you at the park?"

He nodded. "In this weather, there's no one there. I knew he didn't like it there, but . . ." He didn't finish.

"But you were the coach."

"I knew Lomax. He'd never let me see he was nervous. Afraid. It never occurred to me he'd bring her along."

"For company," I told him. "That's what his little sister said."

"I almost didn't—didn't do it, when I saw she was there. I tried one more time to talk him out of it. Told him I'd get his academic

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grades raised so he'd be sure to graduate. Told him I'd get him a job. Told him Drum needed him to quit."

"What did he say?"

The coach looked across the gym. "He said if scouts were coming down to look at Drum, maybe they were interested in point guards, too."

He brought his eyes back to me. "It was the only way, Smith."

"No," I said.

I smoked my cigarette. Farlow looked down at his hands, tough with years of balls and blackboards.

"What are you going to do?" he asked. "Will you tell Sweeney?"

"Sweeney won't hear it. I have no hard evidence. To him this case is closed."

"Then what?" he asked. His eyes lit faintly with something like hope.

I looked toward the door the players had disappeared through. "I have a client," I said.

"You'll tell Coe?"

I crushed the cigarette against the stands, dropped the butt back in the pack. "Or you will."

We stood together, wordless. "You know what's the worst part?" he finally said.

"What?"

"Coe's twice the man the rest of them are. Drum's a bully, Lomax was a creep. Ash is a coward. But Coe, he's tough but not mean. He can tell right from wrong and he doesn't let his ego get in the way. But there's nothing I can do for him. I can't help him, Smith. But I can help Drum."

"Yesterday," I said, "you told me I was here because avenging his buddy made Raymond feel like a man. And that that helped."

He stared at me. He made a motion toward the door where the players had gone, but he stopped.

"I'll wait for Raymond to call me," I said. "I'll give him a few days. Then I'll call him."

I looked once more around the gym, then walked the short aisle between the stands, leaving the coach behind.

I was at the piano the next afternoon when Raymond called. No small talk: "Coach told me," he said.

I shut the keyboard, pulled a cigarette from my pocket. "What did you do?"

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"First, I couldn't believe it. Stared at him like an idiot. Coach, man! You know?"

I did know; I said nothing.

"Then I feel like killing him."

I held my breath. "But?"

"But I hear C in my head," Raymond said. "Laughing. 'What so damn funny, homey?' I ask him. 'This the guy burned you.' C keep laughing, in my head. He say, 'For Tyrell, brother? This about the funniest thing ever.' Just laughing and laughing."

"What did you do?"

"Slammed out of there, to go and think. See, I was stuck. What you gonna do, Ray, I be asking myself. Go to the cops? Give me a break."

"If you want to do that," I said, "I'll see it through with you."

"No," he said. "Ain't my way. Another thing, I could do Coach myself; but that ain't my way neither. So what I'm gonna do, just let him walk away? He done my main man; got to pay for that. Got to pay. But in my head, C just laughing. 'For Tyrell, man?' And then I know what he mean. And I know I don't got to do nothing."

"Why not?" I asked.

" 'Cause Tyrell, he been with Ayisha before C."

It took a second, then it hit.

"Jesus," I said.

"Yeah," Raymond agreed. "What Coach done, he done to get Tyrell his shot. But Tyrell ain't gonna have no shot."

No shot. No pro career, no college years. Two murders. A lifetime of hard-won trust, everything thrown away for nothing. Tyrell might be able to avoid going public, might be able to keep his mouth shut the way Lomax hadn't; people might not know, at first. But the virus was inexorable. It would get Tyrell before Tyrell had a chance to make everyone's dreams come true.

"Raymond," I said, "I'm sorry."

"Man," he said, "so am I."

There wasn't anything more. I told Raymond to keep in touch; he laughed shortly and we both knew why. When we hung up I stood at the window for a while. After the sky turned from purple to gray, after the promise faded, I pulled on my jacket, went over to the 4th Street courts, and watched the kids play basketball under the lights. ●

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THE CARER

by Ruth Rendell

Single-author short story collections are hard to sell in the current marketplace, but Britain's Ruth Rendell is about to see the publication of her sixth such volume, in which the following story will appear. Ms. Rendell's novels regularly make the bestseller lists in the U.K., and her following in the U.S. has continued to grow. American fans can find her latest novels, *Simisola* and *No Night Is Too Long*, in editions by Harmony Books.

The house and the people were new to her. They had given her a key, as most did. Angela had a cat to feed and a rubber plant to water. These tasks done, she went upstairs, feeling excited, and into the bedroom where she supposed they slept.

They had left it very tidy, the bed made with the covers drawn tight, everything on the dressing table neatly arranged. She opened the cupboards and had a look at their clothes. Then she examined the contents of the dressing-table drawers. A box of jewellery, scarves, handkerchiefs that no one used anymore. Another drawer was full of face creams and cosmetics. In the last one was a bundle of letters, tied up with pink ribbon. Angela untied the ribbon and read the letters which were from Nigel to Maria, the people who lived here, love letters written before they were married, full of endearments, pet names, and promises of what he would do to her next time they met and how he expected she would respond.

She read them again before tying the ribbon round them and putting them back. Letters were a treat; she rarely came upon any in her explorations of other people's houses. Letters, like so many other things, had gone out of fashion. She went downstairs again, repeating under her breath some of the phrases Nigel had written and savouring them.

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In the street where she lived Angela was much in demand as babysitter, dog-walker, cat-feeder, and general carer. Her clients, as she called them, thought her absolutely reliable and trustworthy. No one had ever suspected that she explored their houses while alone in them. After all, it had never occurred to Peter and Louise to place hairs across drawer handles; Elizabeth would hardly have known how to examine objects for fingerprints; Miriam and George were not observant people. Besides, they trusted her.

Angela lived alone in the house that had been her parents' and spent one weekend a month staying with her aunt in the Cotswolds, and while there she went to the Methodist church on Sunday. She had a job in the bank half a mile away. Once a year she and another single woman she had met at work went to Torquay or Bournemouth for a fortnight's holiday. She had never been out with a man; she never met any men except the ones in her street who were married or living with a partner. She had no real friends. She knitted, she read a lot, she slept ten hours a night.

Sometimes she asked herself how she had come to this way of living, why had her life not followed the pattern of other women's, why had it been without adventure or even event, but she could only answer that this was the way it had happened. Gradually it had happened, without her seeing an alternative or knowing how to stop its inexorable progress to what it had become. Until, that is, Humphrey asked her to feed the cat while he was away, and from that beginning she built up her business.

She had keys to eleven houses. Caring for them, their owners' children, elderly parents, pets, and plants, had become her only paid employment, for, thankful to do so at last, she had given up her job. At first, performing these tasks punctually and efficiently had been enough — the gratitude she received and the payment. She liked her neighbours' dependence on her. She had become indispensable and that gave her pleasure. But after a time she had grown restless sitting in John and Julia's living room with a sleeping baby upstairs, she had felt frustrated as she locked Humphrey's door and went home after feeding the cat. There should be something more, though more what? One night, when Diana's baby cried and she had been in to quieten it, her footsteps, as if independently of her will, took her along the passage into its parents' bedroom. And so it began.

The contents of cupboards and drawers, the bank statements and bills, Louise's diary—that was her most prized find—Ken's certifi-

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cates, Miriam's diplomas, Peter's prospectuses, Diana's holiday snapshots, all this showed her what life was. That it was the life of other people and not hers did not much trouble her. It educated her. Searching for it, finding new aspects of it, additions to what had been examined and learned before, was something to look forward to. There had not been much looking forward in her existence, or much looking back, come to that.

The neighbour who had written the love letters had recently moved into the house four doors down. Angela was recommended to him and his wife by Rose and Ken next door.

"If you'd like to let me have a key," Angela had said, "it will be quite safe with me." She made the little joke she always made. "I keep all the keys under lock and key."

"We're away quite a lot," said Maria, and Nigel said:

"It would be a load off our minds if we could rely on you to feed Absalom."

When her business first started Angela conducted her investigations of someone else's property only when legitimately there with a duty to perform. But after a while she became bolder and entered a house whenever the fancy took her. She would watch to see when her neighbours went out. Most of them were out at work all day anyway. It was true that all the keys were kept locked up. They were in a strongbox, each one labelled. Angela always asked for the back-door key. She said it was more convenient if there was a pet to be fed and perhaps exercised. What she didn't say was that you were less likely to be seen entering a house by the back door than the front.

The principal bedroom at Nigel and Maria's had been thoroughly explored on her first visit. But only that one bedroom. Once, greedy for sensation, during a single two-hour duty at John and Julia's she had searched every room, but since then she had learned restraint. It was something to dread, that the treasures in all the houses she had keys to might become exhausted, every secret laid bare, her goldmines overworked and left barren. So she had left the desk in Maria's living room for another time, though it had been almost more than she could bear, seeing it there, virgin so to speak, inviolate. She had left the desk untouched and all the cupboards and filing cabinets unplundered in the study they had made out of the third bedroom.

Maria went away one evening. Nigel told Angela she had gone and he would be joining her in a day or two. She noticed he stayed away

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from work, and she waited for him to call and ask her to feed Absalom in his absence. He never came. Angela was much occupied with babysitting for Peter and Louise, driving Elizabeth's mother to the hospital, letting in the meter man and the plumber for Miriam and George, and taking Humphrey's cat to the vet, but she had time to wonder why he hadn't asked.

Returning home from watering Julia's peperomias, she met Nigel unlocking his car. He had Absalom with him in a wicker basket.

"Going away tonight?" Angela said hopefully.

"I shall be joining Maria. We thought we'd try taking Absalom with us this time, so we shan't require your kind services. But I expect you've plenty to do, haven't you?"

Thinking of the evening ahead, Angela said she had. She was almost as excited as on the day she began reading Louise's diary. Angela gave it an hour after Nigel's car had gone. She took the key out of the strongbox and let herself into the house. A happy two hours were spent in a search of the desk, and although it uncovered no more love letters, it did disclose several final demands for payment of bills, an angry note from George complaining about Absalom's behaviour in his garden, and, best of all, an anonymous letter.

This letter was printed in ink and suggested that Maria had been having an affair with someone called William. Angela thought about this and wondered what it would be like, having an affair when you were married, that is, and she wondered what being married was like anyway, and whether it was William's wife or girlfriend who had written the letter. She put everything back in the desk just as she had found it, being careful not to tidy up.

The rooms upstairs she left for next day. It was a Friday and she was due to drive to Auntie Joan's for the weekend that evening, but first she had Elizabeth's dogs to walk morning and afternoon and Elizabeth's mother to fetch from the hospital, the electrician to let in for Rose and Ken, and Louise's little girl to meet from school. There were two hours to spare between coming back from the hospital and fetching Alexandra. Taking care not to be seen by the electrician, putting in a new point next-door in the back room, Angela let herself into Nigel and Maria's house.

Overnight, she had felt rather nervous about that desk and the first thing she did was check that everything was back in place. An examination quickly reassured her that she had accurately replicated its untidiness. Then she went upstairs and along the passage to the study. Louise's diary notwithstanding, Maria and Nigel's

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house promised to afford her the richest seam of treasure she had yet encountered. And who knew what would be behind this door in the cupboards and the filing cabinets? More love letters, perhaps, hers to him this time, more insinuations of Maria's infidelity, more unpaid bills, even something pointing to illegality or crime.

Angela opened the door. She took a step into the room, then a step backwards, uttering a small scream she would have suppressed if she could. Maria lay on the floor, wearing a nightdress, her long hair loose and spread out. There was a large brown stain that must have been blood on the front of her nightdress and unmistakable blood on the floor around her. Angela stood still for what seemed a very long time, holding her hand over her mouth. She forced herself to advance upon Maria and touch her. It was her forehead she touched, white as marble. Her fingertip encountered icy coldness and she pulled it away with a shudder. Maria's dead eyes looked at her, round and blue like marbles.

Angela went quickly downstairs. She was trembling all over. She let herself out of the back door, locked the door, and put the key through the letter box at the front. It somehow seemed essential to her not to have that key in her possession.

She went home and packed a bag, found her car keys. Fetching Alexandra was forgotten, and so were Elizabeth's dogs. Angela got into her car and drove off northwards, exceeding the speed limit within the first five minutes. She thought she would stay at least a fortnight with Auntie Joan. Perhaps she would never come back at all. If this was life, they could keep it. It was death, too. ●

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Art by Darryl Elliott

The Problem of the Enormous Owl

by Edward D. Hoch

The summer of '39 was a tumultuous one (Dr. Sam Hawthorne was telling his guest over a small libation). War was in the air, and every day the newspaper headlines told of troop movements and preparations in Europe. Still, in a small New England town like Northmont life went on pretty much as it always had. Certainly there were more automobiles now than when I'd moved here in 1922, a newly licensed M.D. with my folks' gift of a yellow Pierce-Arrow Runabout. The car attracted more attention than I did during those early years.

Already by the late thirties cars were changing the way we lived and worked, broadening our horizons. No one had been particularly

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surprised when the old Duffy farm sold to a New York City playwright who'd won a Pulitzer Prize back in the twenties. His name was Gordon Cole and he did most of his writing on the farm, driving into Manhattan only when it was necessary to consult his agent or producers. The surprising thing was that Cole and his wife Maggie were actually farming the land, which was more than a hundred acres and quite a chore, even with help.

I'd treated Maggie Cole for a minor complaint earlier in the year, though I barely knew her husband. Still, when Maggie phoned the office that Tuesday morning in late August to tell me something had happened to Gordon, I told her I'd be right over.

"What is it?" my nurse Mary Best asked as I picked up my black bag and headed for the door.

"Maggie Cole's husband, our famous playwright. She found him out in the field and she's practically hysterical. Mrs. Philips has an eleven o'clock appointment. Better tell her I've been called out on an emergency and reschedule her for later in the week."

I drove out to the Duffy farm, as the local people still thought of it, and saw Maggie waiting for me in the cinder driveway. From her medical records I knew that she was forty-seven years old, though she seemed much younger. Her husband was fifty. The local paper had done a story on him when they moved to Northmont a couple of years back, and one of their columnists, Polly Ketchum, had interviewed him recently.

"He's way back in the field," she told me, getting into the car. "We can drive part of the way."

"Is he conscious?"

"I think he's dead," she sobbed. "He's not moving at all."

Maggie's hair was long and blond, with only a few streaks of gray beginning to appear. Her blue eyes now were red and puffy. She

A reminder to fans of Edward D. Hoch's Dr. Sam Hawthorne stories: As we remarked in an earlier issue, Crippen & Landru Publishers will soon be bringing out a collection of the Hawthorne stories. The expected publication date is spring of this year; interested readers should write to Douglas Greene, P. O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505. †

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wore a pair of old slacks and a man's plaid shirt, apparently her work clothes on the farm. She was a small woman, barely coming to my shoulders.

"What time did he go out this morning?" I asked as I drove along the rutted driveway toward the barn and other outbuildings behind the house.

"I don't really know. He has a studio out back where he does his writing. Sometimes when he's deep into a new play he sleeps out there. I hadn't seen him since last night after dinner."

We left the car out behind the barn and walked about a hundred yards back through the field. There was only grass growing here. Maggie explained that they practiced crop rotation. Next year they'd planned to plant corn here.

I knew Gordon Cole was dead even before we reached the body. There were flies buzzing around him in the morning sunshine, attracted by subtle odors we could not yet detect. As I bent over the body I saw a trickle of dried blood on his mouth and chin, indicating internal bleeding. Though I'd never examined Cole in his lifetime, it looked to me as if his chest had caved in. I put my hand on his rib cage and could feel the broken bones. "What's this?" I asked, indicating a pair of greasy feathers stuck to his shirt.

"I don't know. Bird feathers, I guess. They were there when I found him. Is he—?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Cole. It appears he died of internal injuries, but we won't be certain until after the autopsy."

"But—but what happened to him?"

"Sometimes a tractor accident—"

She shook her head. "The tractor's back in its shed by the barn. I looked there after breakfast because he was going to plow a field this morning. When I saw the tractor still there I headed back to his studio to see if he'd overslept. He sometimes did that if he worked half the night on a play."

I straightened up. "We're going to have to notify Sheriff Lens."

"Of course."

"Is there anyone else here with you on the place?"

"We have a farm manager, Jud Duffy."

"I know Jud."

"We bought the land from his family after his folks died. We needed someone to manage the farm and he knew more about it than anyone else. We hire seasonal workers to help with the planting and harvesting."

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"Is Jud here now?"

She shook her head as we headed back to the house. "On Tuesday mornings he usually goes shopping for supplies. He'll be back around noon."

I phoned Sheriff Lens and told him what we had. "Does it look like murder, Doc?" he asked.

I glanced at Maggie Cole, cleaning up the breakfast dishes. "I can't say. You'd better have a look."

The end of summer was always a slow time at the hospital. People were vacationing, the weather was good, and the schools hadn't yet reopened to a new season of childhood diseases. Mary Best had the autopsy report for me by the end of the afternoon, and I phoned Sheriff Lens at once.

"Sheriff, as I suspected, Gordon Cole's chest was crushed. He died within minutes from massive internal bleeding. Dr. Miller, who did the autopsy at the hospital, is also a bird watcher in his spare time. The feathers found on Cole's shirt are from a great horned owl."

I could hear the sheriff's sigh at the other end of the line.

"Doc, you gonna tell me Gordon Cole was killed by an owl? That would look great in the New York papers!"

"It would have taken an enormous owl to inflict those injuries. Still, something killed him. I think we'd better go back out there in the morning. We can have another talk with Mrs. Cole and look around the place."

Mary was grinning when I hung up the phone. "An enormous owl? Are you going off on one of your crazy murder investigations again, Sam? Do you think the owl ran into him in the dark, or maybe picked him up in its claws and dropped him from the sky?"

"I don't know what killed him, Mary, but at this point it hardly seems to have been a natural death."

The sheriff and I drove out there the following morning. He was in a rare contemplative mood as he maneuvered the official car around a herd of cows being led out to pasture. "You know, Doc, all this war news is upsetting my wife. She's afraid they might start drafting people into the army."

The thought of it made me chuckle. "We're too old for them, Sheriff. I'll be forty-three pretty soon."

"If there's a war in Europe it could change a lot of things."

I couldn't argue with that. Mary and I had talked about it in the office, too.

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Maggie Cole was waiting for us at the farmhouse and Jud Duffy was with her. "I have to go to the funeral parlor with Gordon's clothes," she said dispassionately. "Jud can answer any questions you have."

Jud was a muscular young man with dark hair and a port-wine birthmark on his left cheek. Possibly because of the birthmark, he'd grown up somewhat shy and withdrawn. The farm could have been his after his parents died, but he'd shown no interest in the responsibilities that entailed. He seemed quite content working as a manager for the Coles. After Mrs. Cole went off to the funeral parlor he turned his attention to us. "What is it you need to know?"

"Well, mostly about Gordon Cole's movements during the hours before his death," the sheriff said. "We understand he spent the night in his studio. We'd like to see that."

"I'll get the key."

"He kept it locked?" I asked.

"Sure. His manuscripts are all out there, including the current one." He took a key from a pegboard in the kitchen and we followed him out the back door. "This is the spare," he explained. "He carried his own key with him."

There was little point in driving to the barn, so we left the sheriff's car where it was and walked the entire distance. "Mrs. Cole mentioned that her husband was planning to do some plowing yesterday morning," I said. "What was that about?"

"They recently bought a five-acre lot from Pete Antwerp on the next farm. The lot's cut off from the rest of his place by the creek and he wanted to sell it. Gordon Cole figured he might as well add it to his land. He was planning to take the tractor out yesterday morning and harrow it."

"Isn't that something you'd have done?" Sheriff Lens asked.

"He often sought relaxation from his writing by performing various chores around the farm. Since it was my morning to buy supplies, he figured it was a perfect time for him to harrow the field."

The place where Maggie had found her husband's body was about halfway between the barn and the studio, across the open field. When I saw where Duffy was leading us I said at once, "That's the old sugarhouse!"

"Sure," he agreed. "When I was a kid we made maple syrup there. My brother an' me hauled small trees and helped cut the wood for the fire. After Cole bought the place, he converted it into a studio for his writing. Had to put a new roof on and fix the floor, but he

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didn't mind. Place still smells of maple syrup to me."

He unlocked the door and we went inside. If I'd expected to find signs of a struggle, I was disappointed. Cole's big Underwood typewriter still had a page of his script in it and the narrow bed was unmade. Otherwise the place was neat and clean. "He never ate here," Jud Duffy explained. "Always went back to the house for meals."

"What about breakfast?"

"If he had a chore, he'd do that first and then eat."

"So he was working on his play and then slept here till early morning when he left to get the tractor from the shed by the barn. And something killed him as he walked across that field."

Duffy looked at me and shrugged. "I guess that's what happened."

Sheriff Lens had been looking around while we talked. "Any owls around here?"

"There might be some barn owls."

"Great horned owls. Big ones."

"You see them occasionally."

"Ever hear of one attacking a human?"

He shook his head. "Sometimes if you're out at night walking through the brush you might scare one up and he'll fly at you, but they're not really attacking." His eyes had turned away.

I had another thought. "Is there any farm equipment here that might have killed him? His chest was pretty badly crushed."

"Everything is put away at night, and I wasn't here yesterday morning to take any of it out. Mrs. Cole never touches that stuff, and if her husband took out the tractor or the truck it would have been by the body, wouldn't it? Besides, it's been a fairly wet August. The ground is soft. Any heavy machinery would have left tracks."

"The tractor?"

"It weighs two and a half tons. It would have left all sorts of tracks."

"Let's go look at it," I suggested. There was nothing more to be learned at the studio. Then, as we started for the door, I went over to read the page in the typewriter. It wasn't a suicide note, just page four of a play about a couple of fishermen.

When we reached the spot where Maggie Cole had found her husband's body, the sheriff and I went over the ground carefully, searching in an ever-widening circle. Except for some trampled grass, there was nothing to be found.

We moved on to what would have been Gordon Cole's destina-

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tion, the large shed where the tractor was stored. Jud Duffy opened the unlocked double doors and we went in. There were no windows and the place was dim, with daylight entering only through the doors and an opening for ventilation near the ceiling. "Nice machine," the sheriff said, patting the oversized tires. The harrow was already in place behind it.

"Could you start it up for us?" I asked Duffy.

"Sure thing." He climbed up behind the wheel and turned on the ignition switch, then came down, got out the crank, and inserted it into the hole at the bottom of the grille. Working in the cramped space between the tractor and the back wall of the shed, he cranked the engine until it turned over, then got back up behind the wheel and shifted from neutral to reverse. He had no trouble backing the tractor out of the shed and lowering the harrow. Obviously he'd done it many times before.

"Just to complete this reenactment of Cole's planned route, could you show us how he would have reached the field he was going to harrow? You don't have to bring the tractor. We can walk over."

"It's pretty far."

That was all right with me, but Sheriff Lens chose to remain behind looking over the shed and other outbuildings. As we walked across the field, at about a right angle to the route we'd followed to the studio, Jud Duffy said, "The sheriff should lose some weight. He gets out of breath when he walks a lot."

"I've been telling him that for years." I shaded my eyes against the sun. "Is that where we're headed? Over by that big oak?"

"Right there! That's a marker tree, for the boundary between the farms. But the creek finally got so wide that it wasn't practical for Antwerp to farm these acres anymore. He'd have had to go all the way out to the road and then get permission to cross the Cole property. It was easier to sell off the five acres."

"Isn't that Pete Antwerp now?"

He followed my gaze toward a slender man with graying hair and a moustache who'd waded through a shallower portion of the creek and headed our way. He wore work boots and overalls with just an undershirt visible beneath. "Doc Hawthorne, isn't it?" he called out as he drew closer.

"That's right. Haven't seen you around lately, Pete."

"Been healthy. Don't need the likes of you." He glanced in Jud's direction. "Hello, Duffy."

Jud grunted something and turned away, showing only the good

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side of his face. "Of course you heard about Gordon Cole," I said.

Antwerp nodded. "What was it, a heart attack?"

"His chest was crushed. We don't know how."

He frowned and moved closer. "You mean it could have been foul play? Do you think he was beaten to death?"

"There was no other evidence of it, just the massive blow to the chest. Do you know if he had any enemies?"

"We all have enemies, don't we?"

"Was there any problem about his purchase of your property?"

"No, I was glad to get rid of it. He paid me a fair price."

While we chatted, Jud Duffy had moved away. When Antwerp finally turned to go I had to jog over to catch up with Jud. "You don't much care for him, do you?"

"He used to pick on me when I was growing up, on account of my face."

As we walked around the five-acre plot I saw that the field was rough and uneven. It had been plowed in the spring but neither planted nor cultivated. Weeds had sprung up all over. I could see why Cole would have wanted to smooth it out. But he hadn't gotten that far. Something, an owl or a human, had been waiting for him.

I stopped by the funeral parlor that afternoon, the first of the three days Gordon Cole would be shown prior to his funeral on Saturday morning. The Coles had no children, but an aunt was coming down from Boston and a couple of nephews were also planning to attend. Maggie seemed to be holding up as well as could be expected. When I returned to the office around four, Mary Best said Pete Antwerp had phoned and asked me to call him back.

"This is Dr. Hawthorne, Pete. What can I do for you?"

"I didn't want to mention anything in front of Jud Duffy this morning, but you know, there was something funny going on with Cole."

"Going on? What do you mean?"

"He wasn't just writing back in that studio. Sometimes late at night, if I was walking the dog, I'd see a car parked on my road, down near the path leading across the fields to his studio."

"What sort of car?"

"A blue roadster."

"Any idea whose it is?"

He hesitated. "I'd rather not say. I've told you enough."

"This is a murder investigation, Mr. Antwerp," I reminded him.

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"I've told you everything I know," he said and hung up.

I thought about phoning the sheriff but then decided maybe I'd overlooked something during our brief search of the studio. I knew Maggie would be at the funeral parlor from seven to nine and decided to drive out to her place for another look around.

When I got there, I pulled the car back by the barn, sitting there for a moment to make certain no one else was around. I figured Jud Duffy would probably be at the funeral parlor too, and it appeared I was right about that. I'd waited till nearly eight o'clock, when it was past sunset and night was settling over the countryside. There was barely enough light for me to see where I was going, and I'd brought along a flashlight to guide me.

As I was passing the tractor shed, something made me open the doors and peer inside. The tractor was there, in near-total darkness, and as I stepped inside I heard a sudden flutter of wings. Something large seemed to fly directly at my head. I ducked down, imagining a bat, then realized it was a great horned owl. It flew out the doors and up into the evening sky. Probably it had entered the shed through the ventilator near the ceiling.

I circled the shed and followed the path through the field I'd taken with Duffy earlier in the day. When I was perhaps halfway across, at about the spot where the body had been found, I suddenly saw a car's headlights on Pete Antwerp's road off to my left. The car slowed to a stop and the lights went out. It was too far from Antwerp's house to be a visitor for him. Perhaps, if I was lucky, it was the blue roadster he'd told me about.

I moved cautiously forward. The darkness was almost complete now, but I was on a line with the studio and could still make out its shape against the western sky. As I drew closer, I saw the glow of a small flashlight approaching from the direction of the side road. I figured the driver must have walked about the same distance as I had, but faster. It was someone familiar with the terrain — and someone with a key to the studio, I realized a moment later when the light reappeared inside the old sugarhouse. Well, that would save me the trouble of breaking in.

I turned the knob of the door as quietly as I could and slipped inside. The intruder was near the cot, shining a flashlight on the floor. "Who's there?" I asked suddenly, turning on my own flashlight.

The figure whirled as my light hit her full in the face. I recognized Polly Ketchum at once. She was a strikingly pretty young woman who did book reviews and an arts column for our weekly newspaper.

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"My God—who is it?" she gasped, blinded by the light.

"Polly, it's Sam Hawthorne. What are you doing here?"

She sat down hard on the cot, as if the wind had been knocked out of her. I found a kerosene lamp I'd remembered seeing earlier and lit it. "What have I done?" she said, not expecting an answer.

"You were searching for something, Polly. Something you lost on a previous visit?"

"An earring. Isn't that the worst cliché, Dr. Sam? If I read it in a book I was reviewing I'd groan aloud."

I sat down at Cole's work table and she took a chair next to it. The flickering light glistened off her yellow hair, making her seem like an innocent teenager caught stealing a cookie. "Tell me about it," I said in a kindly voice.

Polly took a deep breath. "I interviewed him about six months ago for the paper. That's when it started."

"He must have been fifty years old."

"Fifty-one next month. That didn't matter to me. I thought I loved him."

"You were here with him two nights ago?"

"Yes."

"How did he die?"

In the lamplight her face suddenly stiffened. "I have no idea. We left here before dawn. I hurried back to my car because I wanted to be gone before Pete Antwerp was up and around. The last time I saw Gordon, he was starting across the field to get out his tractor."

"He never made it," I said. "Something killed him on the way—crushed his chest like an eggshell."

She recoiled at my words as if I'd struck her. "You can't believe I had anything to do with it."

"I couldn't have believed any of this until about ten minutes ago."

She tried to think of some response, then finally asked, "Will you help me search for my earring? I don't want it found here."

"Did you lose it Monday night?"

She shook her head. "Probably one night last week. I meant to look for it Monday, but we got talking and I forgot. Gordon was a brilliant conversationalist."

"Sure." I lowered the lamp to the floor and we searched together but found nothing. She felt around the bedclothes too but it was fruitless. After ten minutes we gave up.

"I had to try finding it," she said, somewhat apologetically.

I stood up and brushed off the knees of my trousers. "Ever see any

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owls around here, Polly?"

"I never did. Once we heard a noise at night and Gordon said it was an owl. Why?"

"There were owl feathers on his shirt." I didn't bother to repeat any theories about enormous owls.

"My earring—" she began but then stopped.

"What?"

"I have to be going," she decided. Then, hesitating, she asked, "You won't tell anyone—?"

"That you were here? Certainly not, unless it becomes important to the investigation."

We left the studio together and after locking the door she handed me her key. "I won't be coming here again. You'd better keep this."

"All right."

Then she was gone into the darkness, pursuing a path she probably knew by heart. I wasn't worried about her. She was smart enough to profit from her mistakes.

I was back in my car before nine and on the road before Maggie Cole returned to her lonely farmhouse.

By Thursday afternoon Sheriff Lens was about ready to admit defeat. "If we knew what killed him, maybe we'd know who did it," he speculated.

"You haven't turned up any enormous owls?" I asked.

"You know, Doc, that's not as crazy a question as you might think. I've got a big owl somewhere in my memory if I can just dig it out. Were you at the Grange Halloween party last year?"

I shook my head. "I avoid costume parties like a plague."

"Maybe it was the year before," he mused. "I'll have to ask Vera." The sheriff had married in middle age, less than ten years earlier, and his young wife, Vera, had a reputation for remembering every date and place.

I'd thought about my conversation with Polly Ketchum and its implications, but for the present I was keeping to my promise to say nothing. Another question had occurred to me, though, and later in the day I found an opportunity to phone Polly from my office.

"This is Sam Hawthorne. How are you?"

"All right," she answered warily.

"I have a quick question about that earring you lost."

"Has it turned up?"

"No. I was just wondering what it looked like, in case it does. You

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started to say something about it last night."

"It has a small gold owl on it. I bought them in Boston last year. When you mentioned the feathers it made me shiver."

I thanked her and hung up. For a time I stared at the phone, thinking about owls.

It was raining when I awoke on Friday, and the weather had turned cooler. I had no reason to complain. It had been a pleasant summer and this was, after all, the first of September. The Northmont paper where Polly worked was only a weekly, not given to international reporting, so many of us had a nearby daily paper delivered to our doors. When I picked it off the porch and unrolled it I saw the headline that would change everyone's life. Germany had invaded Poland in a move almost certain to mean widespread war in Europe.

I went to the phone and called Sheriff Lens. "It looks like war," I said.

"Just heard about it on the radio, Doc. They say the British are mobilizing and they've started evacuating women and children from their cities."

"God help us all."

"Doc, I was going to phone you. Vera's been going through some snapshots she took at the Grange Halloween parties. I think she found our owl."

"I'll stop on my way to the office."

I phoned Mary Best at her apartment, knowing she wouldn't yet be in the office at eight o'clock. "They say there's going to be a war, Sam. Will America get into it?"

"We might, if it lasts awhile. Hitler is crazy enough to try anything. Look, Mary, I'm still helping the sheriff on the Gordon Cole case. Do I have anything urgent this morning?"

"Only your hospital rounds. Mrs. Snyder had her baby during the night and all's well. Dr. Fitzpatrick delivered it."

"Fine. I'll stop by to see her later this morning." More and more of my patients were going to specialists—in this case, an obstetrician who'd recently set up a practice in Northmont. I could see the changing face of medicine and had nothing but praise for the better care my patients were receiving. I felt just a bit envious though, when I heard of specialists with annual incomes twice as much as mine.

Vera Lens greeted me at the door when I arrived an hour later. "The sheriff remembered an owl and so did I. Come in and I'll show you my pictures."

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Vera was forever snapping away with a Kodak box camera, and sometimes even took flashbulb photographs at indoor parties. I followed her into the parlor where Sheriff Lens was sifting through piles of her black-and-white snapshots. I glanced through some of them, recognizing the sheriff himself as an overweight cowboy and even Mary Best daringly costumed as a harem girl. She never told me she'd gone to any of the Grange Halloween affairs.

"Who's this?" I asked, holding up a picture of someone costumed as a shapely black cat. It was dated 1938.

"Polly Ketchum from the newspaper," Vera answered.

"Was Gordon Cole there?"

She thought for a moment before replying. "I don't believe so, unless I failed to recognize him in his costume."

The sheriff had been holding out one of the pictures. "This is the one I wanted you to see." It was a photograph of someone in a long feathery cape, wearing an owl's mask rimmed with more feathers. "There's your enormous owl, Doc."

"Who is it?"

Vera answered. "The owl? That's Jud Duffy."

We drove over to Duffy's place in the rain and I went in with the sheriff. He stared at us, as if knowing we'd come to interrupt his routine. "I have work to do at the Cole place," he said. "I gotta be going."

"Sit down, Duffy," the sheriff ordered. "I want to tell you how you killed Gordon Cole."

"Killed him! I never—"

"You'd had the tractor out on Monday. You knew Cole planned to use it first thing Tuesday morning on that field he'd bought from Antwerp. You also knew it was quite dark in that shed. When you put the tractor away, instead of leaving it in neutral you shifted it into high gear after you turned off the ignition. When Gordon Cole entered the shed the following morning, just around dawn, he couldn't see the gear shift clearly and assumed it was in neutral as it always was. He turned on the ignition and got out to crank the engine. When the engine started, the tractor lurched forward, crushing Cole against the rear wall before it stalled."

He was right, of course, but I had to ask, "How did the body get into the field?"

"The death in the shed would have pointed to Jud here as the one who'd left the tractor in gear. He could claim it was an accident, but it was much better to come by Tuesday morning, make sure

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the deed was done, and carry the body to some other location. Maybe he wanted it out in the middle of the field, maybe he was headed somewhere else and his burden got too heavy." Turning back to the slender young man he asked, "Can you tell us that, Jud?"

He started speaking, turning half away from us as he'd done earlier. "You've got it right about the tractor, Sheriff, but it was an accident, not murder. I'll tell you what happened, and what I should have told you from the beginning. I needed some spark plugs for the tractor and I stopped by the farm on my way to the John Deere dealer in Shinn Corners. The shed doors were closed when I got there a little before seven. I unlatched them and looked inside, figuring Mr. Cole was already out in the field. I was surprised when I saw the tractor, and then I saw him, pinned against the wall with the tractor hood against his chest. I quick backed it up, thinkin' he might still be alive, but I was too late to save him. I don't know why I did what I did next. I musta figured I'd be blamed. I wanted to get the body out of there, away from the tractor. That's why I carried him out in the field and left him on the ground."

Sheriff Lens stared at him intently. "If it was like you say, Jud, why were you wearing your owl mask when you carried the body out to the field?"

"I wasn't—"

"There were owl feathers caught in his shirt." He stood up. "You got a raincoat? I'm going to have to take you down to the office for further questioning. You can have a lawyer present if you want."

Jud Duffy faced us now, and the will to resist seemed drained out of him. "I'll get a coat," he said.

When he reappeared a moment later he was wearing a raincoat and the owl mask I'd seen in the snapshot. The sheriff's hand dropped to his revolver but my hand was on top of his. "No, Sheriff," I whispered. "It's all right."

"I thought you'd want this too," Duffy said, "so you could compare the feathers. I wasn't wearing it Tuesday."

Sheriff Lens lifted his hand from the gun. "Come along," he said.

I wasn't satisfied and in truth neither was Sheriff Lens. When I spoke with him later on Friday he still didn't have a confession to the murder. Jud Duffy admitted only to moving the body.

"I'm beginning to think it was an accident," the sheriff told me. "At least there'd be enough of a reasonable doubt in a jury's mind to win him an acquittal."

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"What about the feathers?"

"He's right. The feathers on the mask had been treated with some sort of preservative. The ones caught on Gordon Cole's shirt are fresh from the owl."

"I suspected as much. An owl flew at me in the shed Wednesday evening."

"What were you doin' there Wednesday, Doc?"

"Just looking around. Those feathers were no doubt on the hood of the tractor when it rammed into Cole's chest. There was enough grease on them to make them adhere to his shirt."

"So you think I missed out on Duffy as the killer. I didn't solve it after all."

"You solved the *how* very nicely, Sheriff—how a man could die of a crushed chest in the middle of an empty field. It was the *who* that tripped you up, and I didn't know the answer to that myself until I thought about what Jud Duffy told us this morning."

"Then it wasn't an accident?"

"No."

"Did he kill himself?"

I smiled at this. "It would be a bizarre method of suicide. Let's wait till tomorrow, after the funeral. Then I'll explain everything."

"Suppose the killer gets away?"

"That won't happen."

The intermittent rain had ended by Saturday morning and the sun actually appeared as Gordon Cole's body was laid to rest. Some of us returned to Maggie's house afterwards. The neighbors had stocked it with food during the service and I knew many of those in attendance. Jud Duffy was still being held for questioning and Polly Ketchum was nowhere to be seen, but Pete Antwerp from the adjoining farm stopped by for a few minutes. No one stayed much beyond noon, and finally when the last of the mourners had departed only Sheriff Lens and I remained.

"Take some food with you," Maggie suggested. "There's plenty left over."

"No thanks," I said. "We have to talk to you about Jud Duffy."

"I can't believe he had anything to do with my husband's death. Jud wouldn't hurt a fly. You must know that. He's such a shy person because of that birthmark."

"He's admitted moving the body," the sheriff told her.

"From where?"

"Gordon was crushed to death by his tractor. It happened in the

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shed. Duffy removed the body, carried it to the field. He was afraid he'd be blamed for leaving the tractor in gear the night before."

"Did he?" she asked.

I shook my head. "You see, once we established how he died, the question remained as to whether it was accident or murder — or even suicide, remote as that might sound. Jud cleared up that point for us. Once he started talking we could pretty much trust what he said. When he told us he came by here before seven on Tuesday morning and found the shed doors closed we believed him because he gained nothing by lying about such a point."

"The doors were closed?" she repeated.

I nodded. "Odd that Gordon would close the doors if he was planning to back the tractor out. Odd—but the next thing Duffy told us was downright impossible. He said he unlatched the doors! Since Gordon could not have latched them from the inside, it meant that someone else closed and latched them after he was dead. Someone saw the body, then closed and latched the doors out of habit. If they saw the body, why not phone for help, raise the alarm? There could be only one reason. The door-latcher *expected* to see the body. The door-latcher wanted to see the body because this was the person who shifted the tractor gears into high the night before and prepared a deathtrap for Gordon Cole. The only reason for visiting the shed Tuesday morning was to make certain he was really dead."

Maggie moistened her lips with her tongue. "Go on."

"Only a handful of people close to Gordon could have known he planned to take the tractor out early Tuesday morning. Whoever it was had to know about Antwerp's field and Gordon's habits and the fact that Jud Duffy would be off shopping Tuesday morning. That narrowed it to Jud and Antwerp and you and perhaps one other person close to Gordon. Of these people, only you and Jud had a legitimate reason for checking on that shed early in the morning. He worked here and you lived here. He's admitted being here and finding the doors latched. Maggie, it had to be you who unthinkingly latched those doors after finding Gordon's body. It had to be you who set the trap that killed him."

"Why?" Sheriff Lens asked. "Why would you want to kill him?"

She made a sudden movement for the pocket of her black dress, and for a moment I feared the sheriff would go for his gun again. But Maggie Cole had no weapon when her hand reappeared. She held only a small gold earring with an owl on it. In Maggie's life this had been the enormous owl. ●

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THE MIGHTY HUNTER

by Peter Lovesey

George Blackitt sniffed the bottle suspiciously, poured some of the stuff on his fingertips and sniffed again. This would be the first time in a life of seventy years that he had used aftershave.

He took another look at the label. *Surfaroma for Roughriders.* It certainly smelt rough, he thought, wondering how he had allowed himself to be conned into buying a product so overpriced. Embarrassment, really, he admitted. He wouldn't easily live down the giggles of the two young girls in the village shop when he'd given them his prepared speech. "I want it for my nephew in London actually. He's a bit of a ladies' man, wears the latest clothes and drives a sports car. Do you get the idea?"

Having sold him the bottle of Surfaroma, the pert little miss had caused a fresh eruption of mirth from her workmate by asking pointedly if his nephew required anything else from the shop. George had reddened deeply and fled.

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In his day, it would have been unmanly to have used aftershave. Or the other things. He dabbed Surfaroma on his face and winced. It stung.

A large black tomcat stirred in his favourite armchair across the room, opened his eyes, and changed position. Catching a whiff of the aftershave, he raised his head just enough for a more informative sniff, then buried his nose under his tail.

"I don't blame you, Nimmy," George confided to his cat. "However, needs must, old friend. Can't expect a lady like Edith Plumley to entertain a gentleman smelling of soap, oh no. She's used to certain standards from her admirers. A sophisticated lady, chairperson of the Darby and Joan Club, Queen of the formation dancing, treasurer of the village fete committee. Quite a good catch, if she's willing to be caught, as I believe she is."

Nimrod had fallen asleep.

George gave up talking to the cat and talked to himself instead. He picked up his clip-on bow tie and stood in front of the mirror to adjust it. "You haven't seen action in a while, George Blackitt, but things are about to change." His reflection looked silently back, smart but strained, not totally impressed by this bravado. He turned away and reached for the jacket of his dark suit. "Well, you haven't worn this since Ivy's funeral." He sighed as he put it on. "Three years last month. Ivy, old girl, you wouldn't have wanted me to stay lonely for the rest of my life, would you?"

If a response had come from across the great divide, George wouldn't have heard it because he immediately started talking to the cat again. "Nimmy, old pal," he said, "time for another funeral. My own." He leaned over the chair and stroked the glossy, warm fur. "This is goodbye and R.I.P. to George Blackitt, the wretched wid-

Peter Lovesey proved his skill in plotting a mystery in last year's MWA short story contest, in which he took first place for a story with a double-twist ending. Until recently Mr. Lovesey was recognized in the field primarily as a writer of historical mystery novels, but in 1993 he introduced contemporary police detective Peter Diamond, whose latest adventure, *The Summons,* was published in 1995 by The Mysterious Press. †

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ower. And welcome to George Blackitt, debonair, superbly groomed, and shortly to cause a flutter in the heart of one Edith Plumley. Stand by for an announcement." He scratched Nimrod's head. "Come on, old fellow, I'd better get you fed. Who knows, it could be a long night. I'm not saying what time I'll be back. Come on, Nimmy. Nimrod."

Nimrod stood, arched his back, and stretched. His name had been called in the proper tone, though the time was earlier than usual. At ten years old, the big, black tom had one companion he would never leave: the blue ceramic feed bowl just behind the door.

"Here we go, old chum," George said whilst filling the bowl with brawn. "This ought to keep you going till I get back." A fleck of meat jelly landed on one of his highly polished black brogues. The cat pounced on it in an instant. George looked down fondly. "I named you well, didn't I? *'Nimrod, the mighty hunter before the Lord.'"* No small mammal was safe within range of the cottage. In the summer Nimrod would be gone for hours, checking the hedgerows and the little wood across the meadow. Sometimes he went without processed cat food for a week. He brought back what he couldn't consume and left it by the front door: birds, mice, voles, and sometimes baby rabbits, hopeful always that when he went back and prodded one of the small corpses it would revive and test the reaction of his right forepaw.

George sang a line from an old song from years past. "Wish me luck as I go on my way."

Nimrod had his head in the feed bowl.

Two hours later, George was sitting uncomfortably in a rocking chair in Edith Plumley's cottage, regretting having agreed to a second helping of the steak and kidney pie. The meat had been tough and the pastry only semi-cooked. He sipped the tea she had given him and tried to wash away the aftertaste.

"Biscuit, Mr. Blackitt?"

"Well—"

"Do have one. I like a man who can eat."

George took a digestive. He bit with concentration lest the damned thing disintegrate into a pile of crumbs on his lap. "It was a meal to remember, Mrs. Plumley."

"I'm so pleased you enjoyed it, Mr. Blackitt." Mrs. Plumley looked radiant and George noticed that she, too, had made an extra effort. She'd had her hair done and she was wearing a lace blouse. She had some kind of slip underneath, so it was perfectly decent.

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He said, not untruthfully, "First-class cooks are hard to find."

"I've had plenty of practice. You like steak and kidney?"

"You couldn't have made a better choice."

She smiled. "Most men seem to like it."

There was a pause in the conversation. The grandfather clock in the corner was ticking audibly.

"Nice weather for the time of year," said George.

A twinkle came to Edith Plumley's eye. "Next thing, you'll be asking if I come here often. Please, just relax. I suggest it would help if we used first names."

He felt himself blush. "If you like." He still found her attractive, even if she couldn't cook. She was young in her manner. He guessed she was about sixty-three, but she could have passed for less.

"George."

"Yes . . . Edith?"

"I want to tell you something now, and I want to be sure I'm understood. I'm not in the habit of entertaining gentlemen in my home. In fact, you are the first since . . . since I parted from Gregory. If I seem a little eager to be friends, it's just that at our time of life I believe we have earned the right to dispense with—for want of a better word— the foreplay."

"Oh," said George, and accidentally set the chair rocking and slurped tea into his saucer.

Edith continued, "There isn't time for all that pussyfooting. Let's dispense with it, George. Let's admit that we're human beings with needs and impulses."

The digestive snapped. His crotch was covered in crumbs. He moved his hand there to cover his incompetence. He managed to say, "I wouldn't argue with that, Edith."

"Good." She gave him a long, expectant look.

George swallowed hard. Why had she stopped talking? Why did her eyes beg his for a response? Why was a little drop of sweat rolling down his spine? Why hadn't he met her forty years ago?

"If you'd like to know," said George, "I really fancy you, Edith." He jerked his leg and set the chair going again. He was horrified. The statement sounded so crude. Where had it come from?

Edith laughed heartily. "You're a smooth talker, George, and an old rogue, too. I suspect you're making fun of me."

"No, Edith. Absolutely not. I didn't mean it. I mean I did mean it, in a way, but not in another way, if you know what I mean." He was no better than a tongue-tied schoolboy on his first date.

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Like a lifebelt, Edith's command rescued George from his sea of embarrassment. "Come with me. You've been frank with me, and I don't mind admitting that you took me by surprise. And now it's my turn. After what you said, we should definitely hold nothing back. Put down your cup."

Without a word, he got up and followed her ample form through the door beside the stone hearth. They entered her bedroom.

It was all so sudden. George felt a confusing mixture of guilt, elation, and panic. Up to now he had always believed in the afterlife. As he stepped onto Edith Plumley's pink carpet and saw her double bed with its muslin canopy elegantly draped above the pillows, he told himself that atheism might, after all, be more appealing as a philosophy. He didn't want dear Ivy's immortal soul watching the witless ease of his seduction — on one glass of Australian sherry and a half-cooked pie.

And he wasn't entirely confident of satisfying Edith Plumley's expectations.

She turned and said, "This is the only way to get to it."

He said manfully, "I'm game for anything."

She crossed the room and opened another door. The *en suite* shower room, he guessed. Fair enough. He, too, would be happier undressing in private.

She paused with her hand on the doorknob. "Come on, then."

He hesitated. "Both at once?"

She said, "There's room. Come on in." She giggled and disappeared inside.

George took a deep breath like a diver and followed her into the darkened room. It had a curious smell for a shower room, a dry, musty aroma, vaguely familiar. George couldn't place it, but he didn't care much for it.

Edith felt for his hand and gripped it. Then she turned on the light. "Meet my little ones," she said. "Now everyone say hello to my friend George."

This wasn't a bathroom after all. It was a small dressing room, but instead of a wardrobe there were two shelves stacked with glass cages.

"You keep *mice?*" said George, too obviously in the circumstances. He knew the smell now. It was that of the local pet shop where he bought Nimrod his supply of brawn.

"That's my secret," said Edith proudly. "Thirty-nine at the last count. All selectively bred over the last two years."

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"Pedigree mice?"

"Well, of course! Look." She pointed to the back wall, a mosaic of rosettes and certificates. "One more win and I'll be a lifetime member of the National Fancy Mouse Society. That's my ambition, George."

George discreetly put a handkerchief to his nose and tried breathing through his mouth.

"I may have given you the wrong impression just now," said Edith, "bringing you through my bedroom, but that's the only way in, you see. I just loved the expression on your face."

"I wasn't expecting this," he admitted.

"You wondered what the invitation amounted to, didn't you, and I dare say you're heartily relieved," she said. "Heavens, we're too old to get up to things we shouldn't. I think I'd die if anyone saw me in bed."

"I can't think why," George gallantly said.

"Well, someone I hardly know."

"We could remedy that," said George.

"Given time, perhaps," said she.

"Not too much time," he said, feeling bolder now that the immediate challenge had been deferred.

"Any friend of mine would have to get used to the mice," said Edith. "And the smell. It all comes with me, I'm afraid. I keep them as clean as I can. Come and look at these." She indicated a cage set apart from the rest.

George peered politely at the two mice inside.

"Long-haired black-and-white hooded. The classic breeding pair," whispered Edith, her eyes rooted on the feeding mice. "The final show of the year is in Warminster in September. Only a short-haired silver-hood could possibly beat them. And there haven't been any shown at Warminster since nineteen eighty-five."

"You can see they're special," said George. He'd told white lies about the steak and kidney pie, so why not about these pesky mice?

Edith turned from the tank to look at George, her eyes shining. "You probably think I'm dotty, but these are my life. Would you really like to be part of it? Would you come with me to the Warminster show? I want someone to share my proudest moment with me. Then, who knows?"

"Edith, I can't think of anything I'd rather do," said George. Confident at last, he took her in his arms and kissed her. Their worlds collided gently amongst the sunflower seeds and sawdust.

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He was home by eleven. Nimrod was out, enjoying his night life.

Ten days later, new neighbours moved into the empty cottage next-door. George watched from his window in a fatalistic way as an immaculate Land Rover drew up. The place had changed hands several times in the past few years and he'd never got to know the people properly. They had been young couples from suburbia with unreal dreams of living in the country. One winter was usually enough; the familiar red and white For Sale board would go up again and the garden would get overgrown until the new owners came in. Mind, the long grass made a happy hunting ground for Nimrod.

This time the young lady seemed friendly, knocking on George's door to introduce herself before the removal vans arrived. In her middle twenties, with what used to be called a "county" accent, but vivacious and attractive, she said she was Hannah from Dorking and her "man" was Keith — which George took to mean that they were not married. He didn't object. The world had changed, and his own views on morality were changing too. He offered Hannah tea. They worked in television, he learned. She was a freelance researcher (whatever that meant) and Keith was a floor manager, which Hannah seemed to imply was something more exalted than keeping the floor clean, which was George's first assumption. Hannah said she had travelled on ahead of Keith, who was with the removal gang to supervise the handling of some of the more precious items.

The van arrived and Hannah ran out to unlock for them. George settled down to watch the activity from the window. He was rather less obvious about it than Nimrod, who was sitting in the road gazing steadily into the back of the removal van. The Sutton boys from two doors up were out there as well, gaping. George had nothing but contempt for parents who allowed their children to be so blatantly nosy.

Keith, it appeared, was one of the four hefty fellows in T-shirt and jeans unloading the van. George had difficulty guessing which of them was the most likely to be the live-in lover of the elegant Hannah. She looked far too classy for any of them. But in midafternoon the van left, taking three in the cab and leaving one sitting on the drystone wall smoking a cigarette. He had cropped hair and a silver earring.

George remarked to Nimrod, who had come in to be fed, "She's all right, but I'm not so happy about having him next-door." He put on

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the kettle again, preparing to do the neighbourly thing and take them both some fresh tea and biscuits.

"Into the fray, Nimmy, old friend," he said as he ventured out of the door, tray in hand.

Keith didn't even get off the wall. "For us? Nice timing, squire," he said without removing his cigarette. "Go right in, mate."

"George Blackitt, from next-door," said George, still holding the tray and therefore unable to offer his hand as he would have wished.

Keith shouted in a voice the whole village must have heard, "Han, are you there? Guy here with some Rosy Lea."

George stepped gingerly into the cluttered living room. Furniture and boxes stood in disorder everywhere.

"Mr. Blackitt, what a marvellous thought!" said Hannah, appearing from the kitchen. "This is so generous."

"I'll leave it on the piano, shall I?" said George. "There's no hurry for the things. Tomorrow will do."

"Please don't rush off," she said. "Stay and have some with us. Don't worry, I've got a spare mug somewhere. That's one thing we have unpacked."

"Moving is a pain in the arse, ain't it, George?" Keith's voice said from the doorway. "Park yours on the chair, mate. Han and I don't mind squatting on the floor."

George took the mug Hannah handed him and sat like a throned king with slaves at his feet. Hannah offered some carrot cake that they'd brought with them. George politely declined.

"Don't blame you," said Keith. "Hippie food. We'll feed it to the mice."

"Mice?" said George.

Hannah laughed. "Don't worry. The cottage hasn't got mice, so far as I know. Keith has just bought this pair for breeding."

"Caged mice?"

"I'll show you." Keith was on his feet and searching among the packing cases. "Here we are." He brought out a glass tank and held it under George's nose. "Ollie and Freda, my latest investment. Still kipping from the journey."

George glanced into the tank with trepidation. The mice weren't visible. They were hiding under a shelter of sawdust and shredded newspaper in one corner. It moved in tiny spasms as Keith tapped the glass.

"Here, put the tank on your knees a sec," said Keith. Immediately he plunged his hand into the sawdust and hauled a mouse

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out by its tail. "It's either Ollie or Freda. Not easy to tell."

"Put it down, Keith," said Hannah.

"That's how you handle them," said Keith with nonchalance, but he then allowed the mouse to rest in his free hand. It crouched shivering. "I've never been without a pet, but fancy mice are something new."

"It looks a very fine specimen," said George, who was also beginning to know a little about mice.

"Short-haired silver-hood."

George felt his blood run cold. From all his conversations with Edith, short-haired silver-hoods were the only variety capable of outclassing her long-haired black-and-white hooded mice. And these people possessed a pair. "These . . . these are really rare, I believe."

"Yeah." Keith released the mouse into the tank. "They cost me a bomb. Well, if you're breeding, you don't want to use rubbish."

"Are you interested in mice, George?" asked Hannah.

"Well, em," George said guardedly. "A friend of mine keeps some and she and I . . . well, we take a passing interest."

"So you'll be going to the Fancy Mouse Show at Warminster, will you?" exclaimed Hannah, bringing her hands together in delight.

"Well, possibly. It's a long time off."

"Oh, do! It should be a hoot. We read about it in the local paper. Imagine, giving rosettes to mice." She giggled. "If Keith wins one, he says he's going to pin it up in the little room."

"Yeah," said Keith. "And if Ollie and Freda get on with it, we'll have a totally red-silk bog this time next year."

"Cool," said Hannah.

"Yes, cool," said George dismally.

Two weekends later he was horrified to see Keith unloading ten glass cages from the Land Rover. They went straight into the shed at the bottom of their garden.

George slept fitfully that night. He hadn't slept so badly since the summer of 1940, only this time it wasn't the threat of German air raids that kept him awake; it was the prospect of umpteen short-haired silver-hooded mice in the garden shed next-door. September was fast approaching and with it the culmination of Edith's breeding programme to secure her election to the National Fancy Mouse Society. He hadn't said a word to her about the newly arrived competition. He knew it would break her heart.

"George, you look so downcast. I suspect that you aren't looking after yourself properly," she remarked in the men's outfitters when

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they were buying George a new linen jacket for the occasion. "Chin up, now. Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing, Edith," he lied.

"Come over on Saturday and I'll cook you a pie."

George had spent many hours watching the activity in the garden shed. Sacks of feed had gone in. And an electric cable, presumably to supply heating next winter. The shed was built on the far side of Keith and Hannah's garden, but if George weeded his verge by the dividing fence he could just see the darkened outlines of the mouse tanks inside. And often he saw Keith in there, handling his mice.

One August morning he called out, "How's it going then?"

"What's that?" said Keith.

"The breeding."

Keith laughed. "They breed like mice, mate."

"Could I see them?"

"Love to show you, George, but I'm on location this week. Got to fly."

"You don't appear to have any lids on the tanks that I can see. . . . Not that I've been prying, of course."

"George," said Keith smugly, "they're mice, not salamanders. They can't climb sheer glass walls, mate. Don't worry, none of the little beggars will get out. If they did, your old cat would have them, and who could blame him? But I keep the shed locked, so don't lose any sleep over it."

On the Thursday before the show, George had a stroke of luck. He had just been running Saturday's ghastly scenario through his head when Hannah came to the door.

"Oh, Mr. Blackitt," she said. "I hardly like to ask, but you were so kind when we moved in. I wonder if you could do us a favour. Keith is doing a night shoot at the Tower of London on Friday. With it being open for visitors, that's the only time the cameras can get in there. I've never been and it's a wonderful chance. Would you mind keeping an eye on the cottage for us? It's just one night, but you never know."

A spark of hope glimmered in the ashes of George's sunken aspirations. "I'll be only too pleased. But what about the mice? Would you like me to feed them?"

"No, they'll be perfectly all right. Keith will feed them before we go and we'll be back first thing on Saturday."

"My dear, there's no need to rush back."

"Oh, but there is. We've entered for the Mouse Show, just for a

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laugh, as Keith says. We'll see you there, I hope."

Just as she turned to leave, Nimrod came in through the cat-flap. "Aren't you beautiful?" Hannah said, stooping to stroke him. "What's his name, Mr. Blackitt?"

"Nimrod." Usually George explained the origin of the name. This time he chose not to.

Hannah tickled Nimrod under his chin. The cat purred, arched his back luxuriously, and boxed her hair with his paw. "You're quick and powerful, aren't you, Nimrod," she cooed softly, "but you'll promise to keep away from my Keith's shed, won't you?"

George slept better that night. By Friday evening he had worked out every detail of his master plan.

Nimrod hadn't been fed since the morning and the cat-flap was wedged shut. He was prowling about the cottage like a caged lion.

George poured himself a large scotch. "You won't have much longer to wait, old friend," he said. "Fresh food for you tonight. Living food, none of that prepacked slop. How about mouse mousse for supper? Short-haired silver-hooded mouse mousse. Patience, old friend, patience."

Nimrod's mewing was becoming positively feral in tone. He kept running to the table leg that he used as a scratching post and clawing it agitatedly.

The plan was deliciously simple. At about nine o'clock, when it was dark, George would go out. Under one arm would be the football he kept for his grandchildren to play with when they visited the cottage. With the other, he would be carrying a travelling bag containing Nimrod, by now ravenous. George would let himself into next-door's garden and go to the far side of the shed, the side nearest the Suttons' cottage. The Suttons had three boys under twelve, the local tearaways. He would smash the window with the football and push it through. Then he would unzip the bag containing Nimrod and help him through the broken window. Nimrod would embark on an orgy of rodent killing.

As soon as Keith returned to collect his prize specimens for the Fancy Mouse Show, Nimrod would make his dash for freedom, leaving the brash young punk to discover the mass murder and the football, and draw his conclusions. The next time George saw Keith and Hannah and heard the gruesome story, he would say that he thought he'd overheard some sounds in the garden about nine last night and guessed it was cats. He knew the shed was kept locked, so he hadn't gone out to check. Then he would apologize profusely for

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Nimrod's bloodletting spree and Hannah would say that you couldn't blame the cat—or George. And if Keith said that the Suttons disclaimed ownership of the football, George would give a shrug and say, "What else do you expect of modern kids?"

After two more scotches, George looked outside to check how dark it was and fetched the plastic travelling bag from his wardrobe. Nimrod actually came running to investigate, so it was simple to sweep him up and bundle him inside. He fought savagely to escape. "Save your energy, old fellow. You're going to need it presently," said George, zipping up the bag. "Okay, dinner should be ready."

He collected the football, picked up the bag, let himself out, and moved stealthily past the unlit cottage next-door and into Keith and Hannah's back garden. He rested the bag on the ground and took a precautionary look around him before pressing the football hard against the window. The glass shattered easily and he thrust the football through so hard that he heard it break another pane of glass in one of the tanks. He lifted the bag to the level of the window and unzipped it. Nimrod's head popped out, his fang-teeth bared. George helped his old friend safely through the hole and felt the strength in the struggling shoulders. The Mighty Hunter had got the whiff of the mice. The energy coming from the black fur was awesome.

George whispered, *"Bon appétit!"* Having released Nimrod, he picked up the bag and walked back to the house feeling twenty years younger.

The Fancy Mouse Show next day was a revelation. George wandered up and down the rows of tanks and cages in the municipal hall marvelling at the doting owners as much as the mice competing for the titles. They groomed and stroked their tiny charges in an attempt to catch the judge's eye. First there were the competitions to decide the best in each class. Later would come the accolade everyone coveted, for supreme champion.

Edith clutched George's arm. "See George," she said. "See how exciting it all is? I'm not an eccentric old fool, am I?"

"I never said you were," George answered.

The judging of the long-haired black-and-white hooded class took place at noon. Edith's pair took first place. George and Edith embraced.

"I love you, Edith Plumley," George declared. "There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you."

"Just keep your fingers and toes crossed for me," she said tremu-

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lously. "They go forward to the supreme championship, on the stage at four o'clock. George, we're virtually certain to win. Only the late arrival of a truly rare breed would deprive my little beauties of the title."

"So what happens now?" said George.

"I just told you. We wait for the judging."

"No, what happens to us now, Edith. What about our future?"

A rough hand grabbed his shoulder.

"So here you are," said Keith.

George felt the hairs rise on the back of his neck. Fear gripped him. He was certain his neighbour was about to punch him.

But he did not. "George, old pal," he said, "I'd like to buy you a drink."

"That isn't necessary," said George, suspicious that this was only the prelude to violence.

"To celebrate, man," Keith said in the same friendly tone. "We just won first prize in our class. The silver-hoods. Extremely rare, the judge said. They created quite a stir. And they're going to win the supreme champion rosette. No problem."

George heard a whimper of distress from Edith. He'd almost forgotten her in his anxiety. "Edith, this is Keith, my neighbour," he said quickly.

He was about to add for Keith's benefit that Edith was a friend, but Edith said in a horrified voice, "Your *neighbour?"* Then she covered her face and fled. There was no point in going after her. He'd never explain it to her satisfaction.

"What's wrong with her?" said Keith. "Wasn't me, was it?"

George couldn't find words for some time. "I could do with that drink," he whispered finally.

After they had been standing at the bar for some time, while Keith held forth about the idiocy of Fancy Mouse Shows, George managed to say, "Those prize-winning mice of yours — where do they come from?"

"What do you mean — where do they come from?" said Keith. "Other mice, of course." He laughed.

"No, where did you keep them? The shed?"

"Not the shed. They're valuable mice, mate. I wouldn't keep my silver-hoods in the shed. No, they live in luxury, on top of the piano. I just had time to get home and grab them and get them here for the judging."

"What about the mice in the shed?"

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"They're nothing special. They're feeders."

"Feeders?" repeated George.

"Oh, Christ, Han didn't want me to tell you this. People living next-door can get nervous but there's no need. The mice are for Percy. You must have seen him on TV commercials. He pays for his keep. He stays coiled up in his tank at the bottom of our shed. It's got a glass top, mate, so Percy won't get out. He gets through hundreds of mice. Well, he would. In the wild, a fourteen-foot python would be swallowing live pigs and all sorts. They're terrific hunters. So quick. They have these dislocating jaws that . . . What's up, George? Hey, George, you look *terrible.*" ●

DETECTIVERSE

TICKED OFF

by Deborah Lee

I vowed one day to kill him, but scorned the murderous rage—
I had no wish to spend my life inside an iron cage.
And so, I studied weaponry, from bows to poisoned darts,
And boned up on anatomy, and learned the martial arts.
If Plan A failed—unlikely—I would not be upset,
But quickly choose Plan B or C, right through the alphabet.
I became an expert marksman and a master of disguise,
And honed my Ninja skills so I could take him by surprise.
At last, the day of reckoning—I'd finally set the stage—
And as I crept towards him, he expired—
From old age!

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

THE PROSECUTOR OF DUPREY

by David Vaughn

The barbershop was still empty. And had been, I was sure, since that afternoon thirty-five years ago, when I bolted out its front door and tore open my left calf on the sprocket of my bike. The scar was still there, jagged and ugly, like the memory.

From where I sat in the rental car I could see that the bank and several other buildings were also empty. Not unusual for a small town. Like many small towns across the country, DuPrey had gradually lost population to the cities. Perhaps what had happened that evening so long ago was part of the reason the town wasn't busier. I've come to believe that everything has something to do with everything else. What happened was a part of the reason I hadn't been back for so long. And part of the reason I had come back now.

David Vaughn makes his living in the legal profession, as a hearing officer with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Idaho lawyer was born in Utah in a home where books were treasured above all other forms of entertainment. His day job and his busy home life (he has five daughters) might not seem to leave much time for writing fiction, but Mr. Vaughn is halfway through a draft of his first novel.

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It was September, as it had been then. My boss's campaign for reelection as the state's Attorney General needed a boost, so I was on the road. His stand against the special privileges of the mining companies had not been popular in the northern part of the state. I had come up to see if there was any support to salvage.

Ever since law school I had been a prosecutor, first at the county level, where I concentrated on murder and other violent crimes. Now I headed a state task force against fraud and corruption. I was trying to remember why I had chosen this route, and why I had stayed with it. It certainly wasn't the money. My wife wanted me to get into private law practice, and I was beginning to think she was right.

When weather delayed the return flight to the capital until the next day, I rented a car on my personal credit card. I drove west on the state highway, between the dairy farms and the hay fields in the narrow valley and toward the smoke from the DuPrey Mine smelter. Our old, two-story house still stood beside the highway, recently painted but looking bare without the maple trees that used to surround it. I drove into town, parked on Main Street in front of what had been the bank, and sat there looking at the barbershop. I wondered what had happened to Jake's barber chair. I doubted that the town's new barber, if they'd ever gotten one, would have bought it. It wouldn't have been good for business.

The chair was beautiful and comfortable, a massive structure of chrome and leather that turned on a pedestal. The black leather covered the padded arms, the backrest, and the round, domed seat. It had an ornate footrest made of steel. Jake raised the chair by pumping a lever with his foot. A razor strop hung down on the left side.

The room held the aroma of soap and aftershave. A regulator wall clock at the end of the shop, with a pendulum swinging behind the glass, marked the time, but not appointments. With the exception of the DuPrey family, Jake took his customers in the order they came through the doors, although the waiting room sometimes extended to Brownies Cafe next-door. There was a large mirror on the wall in front of the barber chair so the customer could watch Jake work. When the haircut was finished, Jake would strop his straight razor, shave the back of the customer's neck, and then hand him a hand mirror so he could "see how it looks in back" by checking the reflection of the small mirror in the big mirror opposite. I discovered that if I held the hand mirror at just the right angle, and tipped my head as far out of the way as possible, I could almost,

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but not quite, see down a corridor of mirrors that continued through the wall, down the block, and on forever.

I had ridden my bike into town that day. When I got to the barbershop I leaned the bike against the kickstand and pushed open the heavy wooden and glass door. The regulator clock showed ten minutes to six. Plenty of time. A customer in the chair and nobody waiting.

Good. It wasn't always comfortable for a ten-year-old boy in a barbershop full of grown men. Sometimes they talked about things I didn't think I should hear. The past summer much of the talk had been about the death of a pretty young married lady whose body they found downriver, caught in a snag during the spring runoff. My parents always stopped talking about it whenever I came into the room, but I had heard enough at the barbershop to know that not everyone believed it had been an accident. And some suspected that murder wasn't the only crime that had been committed.

"Jerry Sager and his daddy-in-law are ahead of you, Billy," said Jake. "They're next-door having coffee."

My heart fell. I had thirty or forty minutes to sit patiently and endure. That would take Jake past quitting time. He would lock the door and pull the shades at six, but he would finish the customers already inside and I would likely be the last.

I avoided the comfortably sagging couch near the window, chose a chrome chair with a plastic seat and back at the other end of the room, and picked up a magazine. *Argosy*. I wasn't sure, but I didn't think I was supposed to read *Argosy*. I set it down and picked up *Field and Stream*. Jake continued his conversation with the customer, a man I didn't recognize.

"Gets so you start remembering people by their cowlicks. See them on the street, and into my mind jumps this picture of the back of their head. One customer's got two swirls, turning in opposite directions, perfectly matched, just above the nape of the neck. Can't help but think about it every time I say hello. Sometimes when I lift the hair with the comb"—he demonstrated—"I see about the only part of the uncovered body that nobody but a barber, not even the customer himself, his wife, or his best friend, ever sees, and that's the back of the man's head."

I concentrated on *Field and Stream,* trying to make some sense out of an article on dealing with rogue grizzly bears.

"Just last week had a customer come in had three pink scars running parallel down the back of his head, just above the hairline.

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Doubt he's even aware of them. Now every time I see him I think of those scars."

The phone rang. Jake turned to the shelf behind him, put down his comb, and lifted the black receiver from its cradle.

"Barbershop. Yessir. No, that won't be any problem at all." He glanced out the window at the DuPrey State Bank across the street. "That will be fine, sir."

He put down the receiver and stood facing the wall for several seconds. He lifted his hands about waist high, turned the palms up, and stared at them. I saw something that made the back of my neck go cold. His hands were shaking.

After a few seconds he straightened up, wiped his hands on the front of his white high-collared smock, and picked up the receiver again. He dialed four numbers.

"Ann, Ernie comes on at six, doesn't he? Have him come over to the shop, will you?" He didn't say his name. Everybody in town knew Jake's voice on the telephone. "No, no trouble. Just tell him to come over quick as he can."

When Jake turned back to his customer his hands were as steady as ever. He took a hot, moist towel out of the metal towel warmer and wrapped it across the back of the customer's neck. He picked up the straight razor and stropped it. Thwop, thwop, thwop, back and forth across the leather. He ran hot water over a shaving brush, took off the towel, draped it over his left arm, and lathered the man's neck. The razor came down in straight, wide paths, and Jake wiped the soap off on the towel. I could almost feel the sting of the razor on my own neck.

The bell suspended above the door jingled and Jerry and his father-in-law, Leonard, stepped in. Even though Jerry was a widower now, they still farmed together. The bell jingled again as the door closed. Jake nodded. They nodded back and dropped onto the sagging couch.

Jake wiped the soap off the customer's neck. He slapped on some lotion and waved the towel with both hands to make the lotion evaporate faster. He handed the customer the hand mirror.

"See how it looks in back."

The bell rang again, and Earl DuPrey stepped in.

"Good afternoon, Mr. DuPrey," said Jake. "Please have a seat and I'll be right with you."

Earl DuPrey was the thirty-year-old son of the mine owner, Renyard DuPrey. He sat down next to me as Jerry and Leonard

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glanced quickly at each other. Neither spoke. The man in the chair tipped his head from one side to the other.

"Looks fine."

As Jake was ringing up the sale on the big brass cash register Earl DuPrey stepped into the chair. Jake pumped it up to a correct height and combed through Mr. DuPrey's black hair.

"Didn't get to hear much about your trip to Europe last time you were in," said Jake. "Good way to spend the summer?"

"It was an enjoyable trip. Just a little off the top and sides, as usual, Jake."

"Guess you heard our deputy sheriff has decided to quit and sell life insurance."

The comb and scissors started up beside the left ear. Snip, snip, snip. Everyone seemed to have forgotten I was in the room. I put down *Field and Stream* and picked up the *Argosy*.

"A shame really. Always did like Ernie. Thought he did a good job on that girl's death last spring, but when nothing came of it I guess he just got discouraged."

Involuntarily I glanced over at the men on the couch. Jerry and Leonard were staring blankly at the wall behind the barber chair. I saw the reflection of the lights in the moisture in Jerry's eyes. I looked back at the *Argosy*.

"A real tragedy. Beautiful young girl. A great family. You ever meet the family, Mr. DuPrey?"

"Afraid not."

"Wonderful people. I watched that little girl grow up. Never had any kids of my own. Guess they never did figure out just what happened."

Snip. Snip. Snip. The scissors were louder than I had ever heard them.

"Thought Ernie was on to something, but when they lost the evidence he sent to the state crime lab, seems like the wind just kind of went out of that case. You hear about that?"

"Jake, I'd already left for Europe by the time they found the body. Not too much off the top. I'm in a hurry."

"According to Ernie, it was hair and skin they took from underneath the girl's first three fingernails."

"Jake," said Leonard, "maybe we'll come back another day."

"Now sit down. You aren't in town that often. Won't be but a few minutes, and I'll talk about something else."

Snip. Snip. Snip. The regulator clock chimed six. Jake stepped to

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the front of the shop and pulled down the shades on the door and the windows. He stepped back behind Mr. DuPrey. Snip, snip, snip.

"My health ain't been good, you know. Since Janet passed on last year, can't find much to keep me going. You young fellas can't understand, but the shop's about all I got now. Gave up my twenty acres last year. I guess you know about that, Mr. DuPrey, since your real-estate company bought it. Now my eyes are starting to bother me. Worst of all, I feel it in my hands at the end of a long day."

Mr. DuPrey shifted slightly in the chair.

"Oh, don't worry, I can handle the razor. It's just that the shop don't seem so important these days, with nobody to support and so many things wrong with the world."

I'd never heard Jake talk like this before. He always had an opinion on things like the high-school football team and the likelihood of five-ton-to-an-acre hay, but I had never heard him talk about himself.

"Like that poor girl's death. Should never take the law in your own hands they say, but don't you just wish sometimes, Mr. DuPrey, that luck, or chance, or something would put you in a spot to do something about a thing like that?" Jake's face had taken on an ashen color. Jerry and Leonard were both staring at the floor.

"Seems like the system just isn't working sometimes. I tried to see what I could do to help, but they just turned me away with a warning. Said I would only cause trouble for the family. Said the case was closed."

"What are you babbling about?" said Mr. DuPrey. "I made an appointment for a haircut, not a philosophy lecture."

"Sorry, Mr. DuPrey. Just a little more here and I'll be done with you." His voice was flat and dead, as if he were a long way off.

He combed through the back of Mr. DuPrey's hair, making a few quick snips. He paused with the comb holding the hair up above the nape of the neck. I froze in my chair as I realized what he was staring at. Jake set his mouth in a straight line. He combed the hair neatly into place and took a towel from the steamer. He placed the towel on the back of Mr. DuPrey's neck, lathered up the brush, and reached for the razor.

Cling! Cling! The bell rang as the door opened and Deputy Sheriff Ernie Williams stepped in, dressed in his dark blue uniform.

"Something wrong, Jake?"

"No, just want to show you something. Let me finish Mr. DuPrey."

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Ernie glanced at Jerry and Leonard, who both looked at him with empty faces. He glanced nervously at Mr. DuPrey and sat in the chair next to me without looking in my direction.

Thwop! Thwop! Thwop! The razor slapped back and forth across the strop. Thwop! Thwop! Thwop!

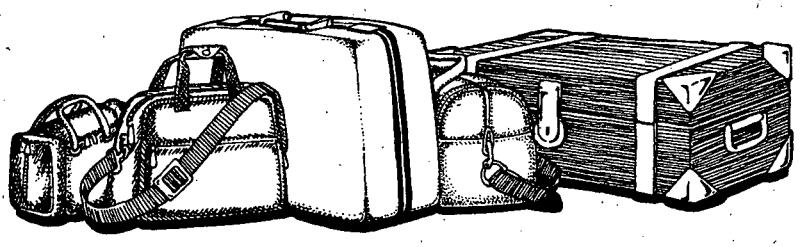
Jake removed the towel and draped it over his left arm. He spread the lather across the back of Mr. DuPrey's neck and poised the razor just below his right ear.

I heard a rush of air and realized it came from my throat. Jake looked in my direction and blinked, as if he had forgotten I was there.

"Billy," he said, "I don't think I'm going to be able to get to you today."

In my haste to get out the door, I tripped over the deputy's feet and stumbled past the husband and the father of the dead lady. As the door was swinging shut I heard Jake say, "Just tip your head back a little, Mr. DuPrey." The bell went Cling! just once, and the door clicked shut.

People inside the shop started shouting. I fell over my bike and gouged my leg. I didn't feel the pain until the blood had soaked my sock and filled my shoe. I was nearly home, still pedaling furiously, when I heard the siren, but I knew they were too late. I stopped the bike and watched the big red Cadillac ambulance with the pulsing red light race toward me up the highway. The light spread its red bolt around and around and around, across the fields, against the front of the farmhouses, and then over me. ●



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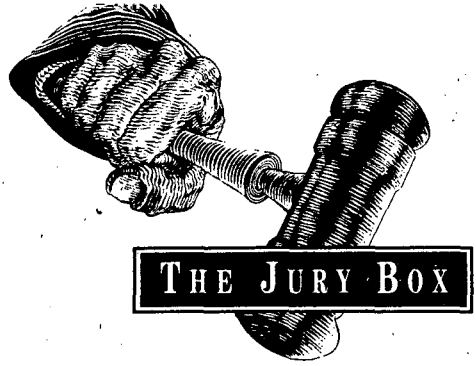

by Jon L. Breen

In the fifties when paperback originals first became prominent on the mystery scene, they were almost entirely male territory, and the emphasis was on the hardboiled, with ample sex and violence and often a quirkily dark world view. (Among the most celebrated of the fifties paperback writers, more so in death than in life, is the subject of a new major biography, Robert Polito's *Savage Art: A Biography of Jim Thompson* [Knopf, $30], a distinct advance over Michael J. McCauley's earlier study, *Jim Thompson: Sleep with the Devil* [1991].) Though female-bylined romantic suspense took over a share of the softcover market in the sixties, paperbacks continued to provide a break-in market for *noir* crime writers like James Ellroy. As recently as 1981, the first novel of another literary wildman was published in paperback original: Joe R. Lansdale's brilliant and shocking serial killer novel *Act of Love* (Carroll & Graf, $4.95), now reprinted with a slashingly accurate foreword by Andrew Vachss (who compares his subject to a "fine pit bull") and an even more interesting afterword by the author, identifying such varied influences as Ed McBain, Dean Koontz, John Ball, and Richard Matheson.

Today's typical paperback original writer has little in common with Lansdale or Thompson. She (usually) is apt to be in the cozy rather than the tough tradition. Though most authors have a modicum of style and humor, their books tend to have too much length and too little puzzle. The best volume in my sampling of the recent paperbacks, covered in approximate order of quality, would have fit right in on a fifties book rack.

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*** Peter Corris: *Wet Graves,* Dell, $4.99. Australian private eye Cliff Hardy is one of the most solidly reliable characters in the familiar first-person male sleuth-for-hire tradition currently practicing. Typically, he is worried over a threat to his license when a client asks him to track down her missing father. The case leads to a series of deaths somehow tied to the construction of the Sydney Harbor Bridge over half a century ago. Corris has the born storyteller's knack for making it look easy.

*** M. D. Lake: *Grave Choices,* Avon, $4.99. University cop Peggy O'Neill finds the garroted body of a widely-hated art professor and is asked by a friend of the main suspect, a Chicano sculptor, to discover the truth. Unlike some cozy writers, M. D. Lake is able to integrate the personal stuff into his story without straying too far from the puzzle. With a lively style, enhanced by acute comments on literature and (this time around) art, Lake is one of the best writers currently published exclusively in paperback. I was surprised, though, that Peggy, who has been hanging around academia for several books and can describe a painting as well as an art critic, has to have the words *docent* and *Emeriti* explained to her.

*** Ellen Hart: *For Every Evil,* Ballantine, $5.99. The art world also figures in the second book about restaurant critic Sophie Greenway. Hart makes expert use of a reliable whodunit tactic: spending the first hundred pages establishing a bunch of plausible motives before finally dispatching hated art critic Hale Micklenberg. The interesting characters and their relationships put this one a cut above most. Hart is also the creator of restaurateur sleuth Jane Lawless.

*** Patricia D. Benke: *Guilty by Choice,* Avon, $5.50. When some of her clearest evidence against an accused child killer is ruled inadmissible, San Diego prosecutor Judith Thornton's hopes for a conviction are based on a very shaky and troubled eyewitness. The author, an Appellate Court judge, is to be applauded for sticking to the case and the fascinating legal and ethical issues at hand rather than reverting to the routine woman-and/or-child-in-jeopardy situation that seems almost inevitable at the outset.

*** Mary Daheim: *The Alpine Fury,* Ballantine, $5.99. With two well-established cozy series, Daheim is more typical of the current paperback writer than any of the above. This entry about Emma Lord, editor and publisher of the weekly *Alpine*

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Advocate, has an excellent small town background, a smoothly readable style, a sufficiently complex plot involving a local family bank, and some well-realized characters. On the downside, the novel is too long and Emma's love life strains credibility.

** Deborah Adams: *All the Deadly Beloved,* Ballantine, $5.99. This is the fifth in a title-patterned series, each of which features the same small-town setting (Jesus Creek, Tennessee) but a different protagonist, a role filled this time by a police chief with the cumbersome sore-thumb name Reb Gassler. The situation is promising: The victim is a nurse everyone claimed to love, including her promiscuous doctor husband, and yet she seems to have been murdered twice. The small-town ambiance provides some good unforced humor, but Adams fails to deliver the kind of sound and well-clued puzzle this kind of cozy whodunit owes the reader.

** Jo Dereske: *Miss Zukas and the Stroke of Death,* Avon, $4.99. The third book about small-town Washington librarian Helma Zukas also eschews fair play in its very thin plot, but the background of a snow-to-surf relay race is nicely employed and the author obviously knows library procedures and staff relations from the inside.

* Lydia Adamson: *Dr. Nightingale Goes the Distance,* Signet, $4.99. Another prolific author of at least two series, the pseudonymous Adamson, whose identity is a matter of speculation among mystery fans, gets the booby prize for this production line entry about veterinarian Didi Nightingale. True, there's some good background information on animal doctoring, but the lovesick twit who serves as amateur sleuth is not helped by a thin plot, considerable padding, routine characterization, faulty construction, and a preposterous solution. Worst of all, Adamson is not conversant enough with her horse-racing background. The amount of ado over the prospects of an *unraced* filly is most unlikely, and the statement that "[j]ockeys and exercise riders are routinely crippled or killed in falls" (page 63) is eye-poppingly inaccurate.

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Death Takes the Funicular

by Gunnar Staalesen

Norway's Gunnar Staalesen is the author of a number of novels featuring series police detectives Kristian Jensen and Henrik Abel Olsen, affectionately known as Poker Face and Dumbo. So far none of the novels is available in the U. S., but the following short story, which finds the pair faced with a Christmastime "impossible crime," gives a flavor of the novels' west coast Bergen setting.

The December snow fell heavy and wet over the city of Bergen. The man trudging up the street left deep tracks behind him on the sidewalk. He walked bent over, with his coat collar turned up, his hands stuffed deep in his coat pockets, and a grim, gray winter expression on his face. It was a gaunt face, angular and colorless. The only things that stood out were his beard stubble and his red, freezing nose. Even his eyes had almost no color, as if a membrane of ice had been drawn over them.

It was hard going, and the streets were almost deserted. It was ten minutes to ten, and the low cloud cover lent a gray, fathomless hue to the evening darkness, as though he were walking on the bottom of an enormous tank in which the snow flaked off and sifted down over him like old paint.

Inside the arched portal to the funicular railway station, he kicked the wet snow from his boots and fished out the money for his ticket. The ticket window was closed, and he didn't see any other passengers. People were at home getting ready for Christmas, and it was too early in the evening for those who had gone out to the last show

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at the movies to be returning.

He continued into the building. Down by the platform gate the driver stood leaning against the wall with his ticket bag slung over his shoulder. He was whistling nonchalantly with a thoughtful look on his face.

The man in the winter coat muttered, "One, to Mountain Road." He paid and took his change. Then he walked up the stairs and into the funicular. He chose one of the compartments in the middle of the train. There he sat down facing backwards, so that he could look out over the city when they rode up the mountain.

The tunnel was brightly lit and timeless. In here it was impossible to see what season it was. In here there was no pre-Christmas atmosphere.

The driver shut the gate and went up the stairs. A moment later the doors slid shut. The signal from the uppermost car sounded, a shudder passed through the cars, and the train was in motion, on its way up.

He was the only passenger.

The driver stood with one hand in his pocket and let his practiced gaze sweep across the tracks in front of the car. The train's movement was almost soporific, and he was expecting no surprises.

The train climbed upward through the tunnel and stopped with a gliding motion at the Prom Street station. Just to make sure, he took a look outside to see whether anyone wanted to get on, but the street was desolate and abandoned. The snow was falling harder, whiter. He gave his uphill signal, heard the signal from the other car, and the train was on its way again.

When the train stopped at Mountain Road, he pressed the button that unlocked the doors in each cabin so they could be opened individually. He glanced back over his shoulder to make sure that the passenger got off at the right station. When nothing happened, he opened the doors from his own seat. Still nothing happened.

He couldn't see the single passenger from the driver's cabin. With a sigh he opened the door and went gingerly down the slippery, snow-covered steps. The snow was stickier up here on the mountain, and the snow crystals glittered. "Hey, mister," he called with annoyance into the cabin where the man in the dark winter coat was sitting. Then he stopped abruptly.

The man's coat was open and he sat slumped over, as though he were sleeping. But he wasn't asleep. On the left side of the man's

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chest, at a fatal upward angle, he caught sight of the hilt of a knife, and blood was dripping onto the floor of the cabin and collecting in a growing pool.

The train driver touched nothing. When he had gotten over the first shock, he trudged resolutely back up to the driver's cabin and reported over the radio what had happened.

The people who had been out on the town had to walk up the mountain—unless they treated themselves to a cab. There would be no more trips for the funicular that night.

An on-the-spot inquiry was performed and the technical evidence was collected. Fingerprints were taken in the cabin and from the hilt of the knife, from the deceased and from the train driver. The latter was questioned very thoroughly, but no conclusion could be drawn.

There were only two explanations for the death: suicide or murder. If it was murder, the driver was the most likely suspect. But this was wildly improbable, since for the driver, the easiest thing would have been to use some mysterious passenger as an alibi, who could have committed the murder and left the train at Prom Street. And if the driver really had had a reason to commit the murder, he most likely would have chosen a different location and different circumstances.

The identity of the deceased was easy to discover: He had his papers on him. His name was Peder Antonsen, he was forty-two years old, had no steady job, and lived in a little shack on Scotland Street. He was a widower and had no close relatives. There would be only a modest gathering at the funeral.

In his pockets they found two things that might be called clues. One was a page for "Doctors" ripped out of the yellow pages. The name of one doctor, a specialist in ear, nose, and throat diseases, was underlined in red. The other was a worn piece of paper on which eight different names were written in cramped handwriting. Two of the names were crossed out, five others had been checked off, and next to one was written "?!"

The two police lieutenants who were leading the investigation—Kristian Jensen and Henrik Abel Olsen, nicknamed Poker Face and Dumbo—were sitting and thinking about these two pieces of paper when the fingerprint expert burst into the office with an excited look on his face. "We've examined the knife," he gasped.

The two lieutenants looked at him expectantly.

"We took the prints . . . they did *not* belong to the train driver."

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"No? Well?" asked Poker Face.

"Or to the deceased either!"

"So it *was* murder," said Poker Face.

Dumbo looked at him, pondering. "Well, *how* then?"

Poker Face said, "When doctors' offices are broken into, don't we usually take prints from the doctors too, so we can tell them apart from the burglars'?"

"Ahh, you mean — maybe we've got this doctor's prints on file already?" He motioned toward the page from the phone book.

Poker Face nodded, and the fingerprint expert was sent to check it out. Poker Face said, "But didn't *our* doctor think that the deceased couldn't possibly have walked all the way from downtown to the funicular with such a mortal stab wound in his chest?"

"Yes, that's it exactly. So no matter how we look at it, we're faced with an impossible crime. A murder that could not have been committed."

The fingerprint expert came back surprisingly soon, even more breathless than the first time, if possible. He looked like he'd found the almond in the Christmas pudding. "We were right!" he exulted.

"We who?" snapped Poker Face.

"You mean . . ." said Dumbo.

"Yes—they *were* the doctor's fingerprints!"

Poker Face got up and walked over to the door. "But then . . . then all we have to do is go to his office and ask him how he did it, right?"

"Keep your shirt on," said Dumbo. "First I have to talk with as many of the people on that list as I can." He nodded at the little piece of paper with the eight names on it. "Maybe we can even find out *why*."

They visited Dr. Hansen at his office the next day. He was sitting behind his desk and writing when they came in. They noticed that he was left-handed. Dr. Hansen was in his mid fifties, with dark, slicked-back hair and a face like an old bloodhound.

They handed him a photograph of Peder Antonsen and asked whether he recognized him. The picture wasn't that good, but the doctor nodded hesitantly. "An odd character. He came in here yesterday complaining about a sore throat. Suddenly he said that he'd heard I collected knives, and asked whether I wanted to buy one from him. He handed me a knife, a rather worn-out sheath knife, quite ordinary. It was not the least bit interesting."

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"Do you really collect knives?" asked Dumbo.

"Yes, I do, as a matter of fact."

"Well, you do surgery, of course . . ." said Poker Face.

"That's correct. Might I ask what this is all about?"

"Where were you just before ten o'clock last night?" asked Dumbo.

"I was sitting at home in my living room watching TV. My wife can confirm this, if—"

"And you had never met Peder Antonsen before?"

"No, I can assure you of that."

"The name means nothing to you?"

"No, I—"

"What about Torill Antonsen?"

"Tor-ill An-tonsen . . ." He repeated the name slowly and thoughtfully.

"You haven't forgotten *that* name, I don't suppose?" Poker Face barked.

"Even though it was six years ago," said Dumbo.

"I—listen . . ."

"You were supposed to operate on Mrs. Antonsen one Monday in February almost six years ago. Early in the morning. Still you were observed, quite intoxicated, at a festive gathering late Sunday night. You *knew* that you had to operate, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did, but—"

"Mrs. Antonsen died on the operating table that Monday morning. It was classified as an 'unfortunate accident,' but many people claimed that it was attributable to . . . a lack of concentration on the part of the surgeon in charge. Peder Antonsen, who was suddenly made a widower, received financial compensation, but that did not make up for the loss of his beloved wife. Over the years he located five people who told him that you were observed in a highly intoxicated state the night before, as well as one of the nurses who assisted you that Monday, who swore to the fact that you made a fatal error in judgment during the operation. . . ."

The doctor stammered, "He . . . he didn't say anything about that yesterday, he just left, and he took the knife with him and . . ."

"But he didn't hold the knife by the hilt, did he?"

"I, I . . . What exactly did happen?"

"Peder Antonsen is dead. Stabbed to death, with a knife that had your fingerprints on it."

There was desperation in the doctor's face when he stood up behind his desk. "I didn't kill him! I had no idea . . ."

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The two policemen stood up. "No, you probably didn't," said Dumbo. "Have a merry Christmas, Dr. Hansen. We'll draw up the indictment against you over the holiday. It will be for involuntary manslaughter. Six years too late, but still . . . And, as I said, Merry Christmas."

Down on the stairs, Poker Face said, "So it *was* suicide after all! But he couldn't possibly think that . . ."

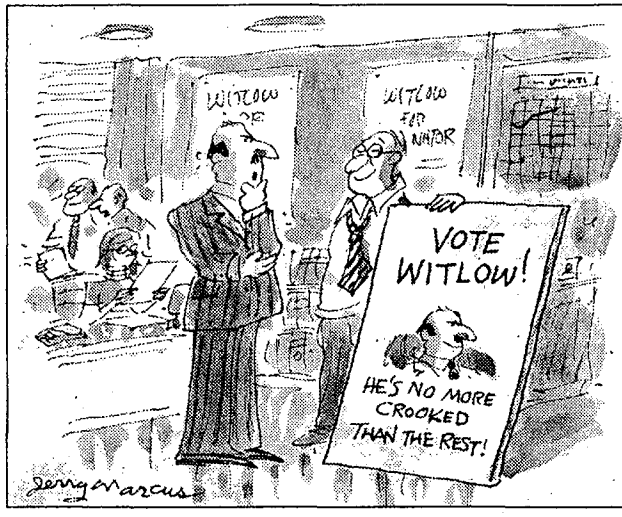
"Of course not," said Dumbo. "But he probably thought that it would lead us to the right man anyway. He delivered the clues right into our hands."

"But good God, man! Why didn't he just come to us with these suspicions of his? Why did he have to kill himself?"

Dumbo gave his partner a tired look. "You know damn well how many complaints we get—and how much importance we attach to them. We have plenty to do with the crimes we *know* have been committed." He paused, then added, "But a corpse is a pretty convincing argument. *That's* something that'll get us to react."

They were out on the sidewalk. It was the last shopping day before Christmas, and people rushed past as though there were a fire somewhere close by. In the streets the snow had already turned to slush. ●

—translated by Steven T. Murray



"True, it *is* a new approach."

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Art by Laurie Harden

LORD PETER'S LAST CASE

by Stephen Murray

The hair once thick and butter-coloured was grey and scant; the patrician features etched with age. The carriage of the head betrayed weariness with life. But the tailoring of the suit was as impeccable, the burnish of the shoes as faultless, the set of the handkerchief in the breast pocket as precise as ever. And the eye behind the monocle, though paler than of yore, showed no falling off of intellect or curiosity.

"Hullo!" Lord Peter's survey of the occupants of the private room paused as his gaze fell on a gnarled, thickset man in a bowler hat. "Who's the johnny who's gone one round too many with Jack Dempsey?"

"Lugg, my lord," prompted Bunter.

"Lugg?"

"Magersfontein Lugg. Mr. Campion's man."

"Of course." Lord Peter nodded slowly. His eye passed on to the

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thin, hesitant figure sheltering behind the bruiser. So that was Campion. Unimpressive. Even in its prime, that face could not have looked anything but vacant; now it revealed frank imbecility. Difficult to understand how the man had attracted so many stories. That silliness about being the younger son of royalty, for example. Lord Peter had known better than to give it credence; but what sort of man permits such nonsense to be circulated? Campion was clasping pathetically at the arm of a sharp, hennaed woman in whom vestiges of ancient beauty lingered. She, everyone said, had been the making of Campion; and that, at any rate, Lord Peter could believe.

For the Baker Street Irregulars, the world's oldest Sherlockian organization, the birthday of Sherlock Holmes is celebrated religiously each year on January 6. Members gather for a dinner in Holmes's honor, marking, in 1995, Holmes's one hundred and forty-second year. In this new story, Stephen Murray has some reflections on the fate of Holmes and the genre's other classic detectives, who might, after all, find their immortality something of a burden. Mr. Murray is the author of seven crime novels.

The heavy, bald fellow with the unmistakable policeman's stance must be — what was the blighter's name? Yes — Alleyn. He stood in desultory conversation with a little cluster of what were only too clearly more policemen. Lord Peter's lips narrowed to a thin unhappy line.

At this moment the door opened and the saurian heads turned hopefully. The newcomers were two waitresses bearing trays of hors d'oeuvres, who began to circulate among the assembly. Lord Peter intercepted wistful glances cast at the waitresses' short black skirts. Apart from Campion's companion, there were other women in various states of preservation among the gathering; but the rule about "principals only" seemed to have been largely observed. The business was going to be demanding enough without a wash of spouses, companions, and hangers-on. Harriet had been invited in her own right, of course; but Harriet had pleaded a headache and asked to be excused. She was pleading a headache rather often these days. Only to be expected, at their age.

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At their age.

That, of course, was the problem.

It had all started with Holmes. Understandably, since he was the worst affected, and had suffered the longest of any of them. Holmes had spotted the way things were going when he was quite a young man. It had been the supposed one-way trip over the Reichenbach Falls — which had miraculously emerged as nothing more fatal than a tussle on a narrow path—which first alerted him. After that he had kept a close eye on Doyle. As the years went past, Holmes's fears began to look only too well-founded. Doyle retired to Crowborough: Holmes stayed in Baker Street. Doyle dabbled with spiritualism. Holmes stayed in Baker Street. Doyle exercised his imagination in the real-life Crowborough Chicken-Run Murder, and still Holmes received no release.

When the inevitable happened, there was scant satisfaction in being proved right.

Doyle died.

And Holmes was condemned to stay in Baker Street for eternity.

As time passed, others experienced the same fate. Few had anticipated it. To the majority it came as a monstrous surprise. Many failed to realise at first the gravity of their predicament. Lord Peter admitted that when the news of Miss Sayers's demise reached him his first response was one of gratification. He had never been quite sure that she was not going to involve him in some last improbable escapade. That ghastly possibility died with her, and he and Harriet contemplated with equanimity a few years' painless decline, followed by extinction. Others of their contemporaries looked forward to the same gentle fate. Their creators dead, and having none of Sherlock Holmes's iron constitution, they could confidently expect that a dozen years would see them slip from life into welcome, and endless, oblivion. A mirthless laugh twisted Lord Peter's lips as he recalled his naivete. Disillusion had come soon enough.

There had been a brief false dawn when it had seemed that *all* characters were to vanish. The making and reading of books, the seers proclaimed, would soon be history. Lord Peter remembered that era of delusory hope well. There had been premature celebrations among some of the more optimistic of them. Those whose creators were still alive prophesied that they would never come to the fate of Holmes, Wimsey, and the others; reading itself would die

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before their authors did. Only Father Brown looked owlish and shook his head; and Holmes, decrepit in body but relentlessly condemned to life, who had taken cynical pleasure in each addition to the roll of the undying, snorted and begged leave to disagree.

And he had been right. Within a few years television was brutally thrusting them back into activity, and the purchase of books began to rise again to new, impossible heights. Fresh arrivals swelled the ranks as Tey died; Marsh died; Allingham died; even Christie died. And each new arrival wailed, with unavailing anguish, "Why, oh why, didn't she kill *me* first?"

So now, here they all were. Lord Peter took a little of the credit. It had been his initiative which had brought the meeting about, and his influence on Holmes (a snob to the tips of his nicotine-stained fingers) which had secured the crusty centequintogenarian's promise to attend.

Invitations had gone to the younger set as a matter of form, but it occasioned Lord Peter no surprise that few of them had bothered to come. Until it happened to you, until a decade or two passed and you realised that you were never, *ever* going to die, you could not begin to realise just how appalling continued existence could be. So they had all made apologies. Morse was out boozing with Dalziel; Anna had some welding to finish on her car; Dalgleish was on a creative writing course; Wexford pleaded family troubles; Lovejoy was lying low for a spell.

Or—no—*one* of the active had come after all. Lord Peter, glimpsing the swirl of a brown habit in a far corner, smiled softly to himself. Trust the clergy to look unpleasant facts squarely in the face!

"I fancy it is time to take the chair, my lord," Bunter's respectful voice prompted. "I have attended Mr. Holmes to the lavatory and it is just three minutes to the hour."

"Thank you, Bunter. Time to bite the bullet, eh?"

A few moments later, with a bustling of sticks and walking frames and a good deal of tart bickering, the company settled into the chairs. An expectant silence fell over the room. Lord Peter surveyed the ranked faces, pursed his lips, pulled himself with some difficulty to his feet, and prepared to discover what collective wisdom such a set of once-keen brains could muster between them.

"Tomorrow," he began, "is my one hundred and fifth birthday."

* * *

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Lord Peter didn't waste much time describing the problem. Everybody there knew the bleak facts. They had been given life by their authors, but had never been granted death. Nobody's creator had thought himself or herself mortal—or not just yet. There had always been the possibility of another story. And when at last they found themselves on their deathbeds, they had more pressing matters on their minds and no leisure to pen the lines that would have granted their creations that release they themselves were so soon to receive.

And so the characters lived on. For some of them, that meant a pretty thin existence. Lord Peter, surveying the company from the modest eminence of the dais, contemplated his own existence—the Piccadilly flat, the harpsichord and the piano, Scarlatti, Bach, his books, Harriet, and Bunter—and wondered how some of the others, even those whose experience of eternal life had so far been brief, coped. You could forgive your author's youthful indulgences—the obscure skills, bizarre hobbies, pretentious talents, and recherché accoutrements with which they had saddled you—when time hung heavy on the hands. But if your sole substantial characteristics were a fondness for Balkan Sobranies and an ability to solve locked-room mysteries—and your author's hand was dust in the grave, never to write another word—then how must existence drag! Ever the same track to follow, condemned to your own thinness.

"I have lived long enough," Lord Peter concluded his address. "Some of you, I know, feel even more keenly this wretched fate of ours. It shouldn't be beyond our wits to solve this mystery."

He sat down to a rumble of agreement and desultory applause.

"It's so dashed unfair."

"Clearly, we must each undertake to kill one of the others," Strangeways proclaimed. "A sort of suicide pact. The problem is finding enough methods."

"The method? Pah! Do you think," asked Dr. Fell lugubriously, "that with the whole of the pharmacopoeia at my disposal I have not many times attempted to engineer my own demise? The problem is that nothing I take has the slightest effect!"

Lord Peter could confirm that. He had tried shooting himself on several occasions. Neither he nor the bullets having substantial existence, the result had been merely frustration.

"Could we write a story involving us all in some cataclysm?"

"They'd never publish it."

"I fear," Father Brown said, "they'd never publish *anything* we wrote."

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A glum silence settled on the company as they considered the unlikelihood of any publisher conniving in the disposal of a lucrative property.

"We could get at the publishers themselves," Drummond suggested enthusiastically. "Arrange a few 'accidents'!"

"There are an awful lot of publishers in the world."

"Wouldn't need to kill all of the swine. If one of you intellectual types can trick one of 'em into a dark alley one night, I can promise him a drubbing he won't forget in a hurry." He rubbed hands that resembled pale, mottled hanks of sausage. "Word would get around that publishing ain't such a healthy business. Be glad of the entertainment, frankly. And suppose we go too far—what's a publisher more or less? Pansies or foreigners, the whole filthy shower; it's a positive service to humanity to squash a few of 'em."

"Quite," Lord Peter remarked acidly, into a little silence. "However, I shouldn't care to bet on the outcome. I fancy that shooting a publisher — gratifyin' though the experience would doubtless be from a personal point of view, don't you know — would have no more lethal effect than our efforts to kill ourselves."

It was four hours before the doors of the room creaked open and the wasted, senile figures began to totter out. Four tiring, frustrating, sometimes acrimonious hours. But what does time matter when you have eternity to play with? And they had, against all expectation, come up with the answer. Curiously, it was Bulldog Drummond who put them on the track after all. Even Lord Peter, scrutinising the idea from every angle, could not see a flaw in it. He stood watching them from the lectern with rising exultation, and his arthritic fingers picked out as if on a keyboard a complicated fugue from the *Forty-eight*.

He glanced at Bunter. "What do you think, Bunter?"

Bunter nodded his head with satisfaction. "I think, my lord," he replied with relish, "that this time we've got 'em."

"Where do we start?"

Wimsey and Harriet sat at the big table with a stack of books before them. Wimsey called Bunter in.

"Sensational literature is more in your line than mine, Bunter. We require you to put your shoulder to the wheel."

"I shall be happy to oblige, my lord."

"You know what this will lead to, if we are successful?" Lord Peter

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said. "The thought of oblivion not depressing you?"

"On the contrary, my lord, I find it most invigorating."

Lord Peter eyed him with momentary sympathy. "I always did wonder how the devil you bore it, having to talk like that all the time."

Harriet was shuffling the books into three piles.

"Before we start, my lord, you may care to peruse this article in the *Times Literary Supplement.*"

Wimsey took the proffered paper and spread it out on the table. Harriet came to peer over his shoulder.

A slow smile spread over Wimsey's face. "The clever devil."

"Of course," Harriet said peevishly, "it's always easy for *him.*"

Wimsey folded the newspaper. "Well, we'd better get cracking. Holmes has stolen a march on us as usual. So: Where do we start?"

"Foreigners," said Harriet. "Dagoes and Frogs."

"I wondered about the animals. What d'you think, Bunter? Where would you place your money?"

"With all due respect, my lord, and without any desire to offend Lady Peter, I fancy the most rewarding field at present might be . . ."

"The ladies."

"Precisely, my lord."

The second meeting took place six weeks later. The atmosphere was one of suppressed elation. There already seemed to be some gaps in the assembled company. Several members were looking groggy. One or two were positively ethereal. Holmes himself—it would take a prolonged campaign to make inroads on his robust constitution—seemed not quite the man he had been. He greeted Lord Peter with enthusiasm, rubbing his hands gleefully.

"A capital start. Capital! I feel quite weak!"

"I congratulate you," Lord Peter replied.

The great detective scrutinised him impersonally. "You look pretty solid yourself, Wimsey."

"I'm not rushing things. After all, time is one thing we are not short of. Gratifyin', however, to see that one or two of our colleagues have already managed to shuffle off this mortal thingummy. There seem to be several empty chairs."

Holmes looked as if "colleagues" was not the word he would have chosen. "Insubstantial characters to start with," he replied crustily. "You and I, Lord Peter, we shall take a bit of killing. But we shall get there in the end."

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"The cocaine was a stroke of genius," Lord Peter said politely.

"I am fortunate to have a creator," Holmes said vainly, "who was at least a man of some originality of mind. Most of these poor fellows," he waved a dismissive hand round the room, "had blockheads for authors. Gave them only virtues, no vices. Doyle, I am happy to say, displayed a certain individuality in the selection of idiosyncrasies he gave me. Which in turn provides me with the luxury of selecting my ammunition. Shall it be tobacco, or drugs? Shooting dogs, or perverting the course of justice? Fascism or misogyny? By the way, that was an excellent piece you had in *Cosmopolitan.*"

"Bunter takes the credit."

"The tone of self-righteousness would be difficult to better."

"I fear debauched reading habits lie behind it."

"And the outcome, my lord?"

"I have been banned," Lord Peter admitted modestly. "But only in Hackney and Islington."

"Never mind, never mind. When once the stones begin to rattle, the avalanche will not be long in coming."

Lord Peter brought the company up to date. There were few outright successes, but a good number of minor triumphs which boded well for the future. What proved most to the entertainment of those present was the collateral damage to many of their younger colleagues. When Wimsey asked for more volunteers he found a willingness to help which was almost embarrassing. There was a queue of sleuths begging to have a go at several of the contemporary heroes: Now that the scheme had been proved effective, everyone wanted to deal the fatal blow at their pet aversion. Wimsey was compelled to remind the company that they were not there to enjoy themselves.

Privately, afterwards, he expressed his misgivings to Harriet. "This plan won't work."

"What's that?" She fiddled with a device behind her ear, and a piercing whistle briefly made her husband wince.

"I said, this plan won't work. The minnows are caught but the bigger fish are too strong. A penchant for bashing yellow men may be the downfall of some penny-dreadful hooligan, but characters of the complexity of ourselves, Harriet, are too damnably well rounded to be disposed of so easily."

Harriet, who had long been of the opinion that Peter was too damnably well rounded for his own good, or hers either, considered

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that the problem lay not so much with the substantiality of any of them, but with the fact that reading was such a solitary vice. Acts and attitudes which were nowadays abominated in public were condoned and even relished within the covers of a novel. She was inclined to agree with her husband, though for a different reason, that the present scheme held out little hope for the release of the more prominent among them.

"Quite so, darling," she acquiesced meekly.

"What, what?"

"I said . . . Oh, never mind!"

At the next gathering, the assembled faces were less sanguine. True, there had again been a slight thinning in the ranks of those present, but Wimsey's prediction was proving accurate; those who were left had been barely touched by the scandals of political incorrectness they had themselves sought to stir up. A man like Holmes was not going to be allowed to disappear merely because he did bizarre things to dead pigs and distrusted foreigners on sight, any more than Miss Marple was going to be consigned to oblivion for her high-handed way with parlour maids.

Wimsey did his best by reporting the successes. A letter was read out from Cyril Morse ("And we really must," said Peter when the mirth had died down, "congratulate our colleague Miss Teatime on that coup. Anyone can let a cat out of a bag: It takes genius to construct the cat in the first place.") protesting that he had never cheated in his life. "'The copies of the *Times* crossword filled in with the text of well-known nursery rhymes were never intended to deceive anyone,'" Wimsey read, to blatant guffaws. "'Nor is it true that I am a musical illiterate who cannot tell his Arne from his Elgar. Compared to Lewis . . .'"

But all mirth evaporated as the assembled company considered their own continuing condition.

"Our attitudes," Wimsey summed up honestly, "are very far from correct by present-day standards; but unfortunately our characters are too solid to be demolished by them. We can, I suggest, take modest pride in having released some of our thinner brethren; but for ourselves, the plan is not working."

A glum silence supervened. Lord Peter felt a deep depression descending upon him. Was it to be ever thus? Was every attempt to secure release doomed to fail? Surely, their creators had been human and petty enough: It seemed hard that they should prove to

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have had the power to condemn their creations to immortality.

When he had almost given up hope: "I wonder," rasped Sherlock Holmes, "if any of you recall a little matter I assisted in, which Watson chronicled under the title *The Sign of the Four?"*

"The Sign of Four, Holmes."

"I think you will find, my dear Watson, that it was *The Sign of THE Four,"* Holmes retorted caustically.

"We altered it, if you recollect . . ." Watson began to fumble through a mass of papers. "I have the notes here, somewhere." A few sheets drifted free of the rest and tumbled lazily to the feet of the occupants of the first row. Holmes dismissed the dispute with an angry wave of the hand.

"The title really is immaterial, Doctor. The point is, does anybody remember the villain of the piece?"

"Acting in accordance with information received," said Alleyn ponderously, "police focussed their attentions on an Andaman islander. There was a certain matter of illegal immigration, no work permit, carrying a blowpipe with intent, being in possession of restricted drugs, to whit, an obscure vegetable poison, and—"

"Thank you, officer," Holmes cut him off with a thin smile of contempt. "Your memory is remarkably detailed. As you so excellently recall, an Andaman islander named Tonga was found to have committed the murder." He looked round the assembled company with an expression of self-satisfaction. "I think, gentlemen, that will prove to be the answer to our little problem. Let us hire ourselves—"

"A pygmy?" queried Alleyn dubiously.

"An assassin!"

Two days later a long, low car of sensational but decidedly vintage lines shimmered through the narrow lanes of the Welsh Marches and rocked ethereally up a stony track. From the road it might have been a mere trick of the light as it stood for almost four hours outside a plain whitewashed cottage, before retracing its route by minor roads to London. One or two local people half thought they had glimpsed something out of the corner of the eye and quizzed the owner of the cottage, who was himself the possessor of vintage cars, about rallies and scenic runs; but he professed ignorance, and shortly thereafter retired from community life, clearing his desk, ringing his agent to complain of writer's block, and sitting down before his computer screen.

Putting from his mind the problem of how he would explain the

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gold sovereigns to his bank, he set the Crime Writers Association *Members Directory* by his side, switched on the fax machine, and started to work.

It was the literary sensation of the decade when workmen refurbishing Windlesham, the nursing home in Crowborough which had once been the dwelling of Arthur Conan Doyle, disinterred a brass-bound box from the foundations. Opened in the presence of fifty Sherlockians, it was found to contain the very last Sherlock Holmes story of all. Sotheby's and Christie's vied for the éclat of auctioning the typescript, which sensationally revealed that Doyle had killed off his great detective after all.

"Would you wish to bid for the item, my lord?"

"Tempting," agreed Lord Peter, setting aside the catalogue, "but we daren't court suspicion. It's early days yet."

"If I may venture the opinion, my lord, it was a most generous act to allow Mr. Holmes to depart first."

"Less generous," Harriet interjected acidly, "to deal with Watson as you did."

"What's that? Oh, the bees? My dear girl, you and I both know that if the hive was there, Watson would knock it over. Besides," he added with a sardonic smile, "Holmes made me promise we'd make the chap jump about a bit for once in his life."

"What do you intend to do with the keepsakes?"

"A pound of black shag, a harpoon, and a hypodermic? What do you say, Bunter?"

"If I might suggest: the Oxfam shop?"

"I hope they're not all going to load us with tokens of gratitude," Lord Peter complained peevishly. "Anyway, who's next?"

"Marlowe—that's the earthquake," Harriet said, consulting the list. "He expressed a wish for the earth to—"

"Precisely. What minds these Americans have!"

"Campion and Lugg—they asked if they could go together. I always thought there was something funny about that chap's marriage. We're letting them get lost in the fog and fall into the Thames. Marple, the mugging; Miss Teatime, the gang rape—do you think we ought to warn her? Dr. Fell, spontaneous combustion. Grant—simple heart attack." She looked up. "Our man wants double rates for that one, incidentally, says nobody'll do it otherwise—it doesn't provide enough intellectual challenge."

Lord Peter's snort of contempt provided all the comment he cared

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to waste on the literary pretensions of members of the Crime Writers Association.

". . . and then it's you and me. Oh, by the way, we've had a letter from a chap called, ah, Wooster. Says he's picked up our scent through the Junior Ganymede."

Wimsey turned to Bunter, one eyebrow raised in silent interrogation.

"I very much regret, my lord . . . Rules of the Club."

"Hmm! The blighter wants in, I suppose?" Wimsey asked his wife. "I said . . ."

"Yes, yes, don't *shout* at me, Peter! Says he's willing to pay, got oodles of readies—I quote. A special request, too: He's got an aunt who bays like a wolf and eats broken bottles whom he most particularly wants keeping alive."

"An interesting variation on the theme."

Throughout that summer, while puzzled publishers badgered hitherto punctual authors about the nondelivery of expected new books, the literary finds continued. In attics, in bank vaults, among auctioned effects in country salerooms, and even, sensationally, live on camera in *The Antiques Roadshow,* manuscripts and typescripts turned up. One by one the great detectives of classical mystery were found to have been killed off in bizarre and malicious ways by authors bored with their inventions. One or two discoveries of texts apparently by living authors gave rise to sharp denials and hotly contested lawsuits. But although the sheer volume of finds led many to cry hoax, the minutest textual analysis could not rock the authenticity of any of the finds. The characters in each instance spoke, acted, and even thought so precisely in the manner they always had, that scholars were unanimous that the works were genuine. One by one, the sleuths of the past slipped into peaceful release.

From the seductive embrace of the armchair, Lord Peter looked round the room with a feeling of sleepy well-being. Rank upon rank of chairs sat empty; only Harriet nodded in the second row, her hearing-aid turned off, her wig awry, a faint indecorous snore occasionally fluttering her toothless lips. His eyes rested on her fondly. At last he would be rid of her! It had been an uplifting thing, to be able to provide this last service for so many of his ageing fellow-sleuths. One by one they had slipped into eternity, released from the weary existence their dimwitted creators had never thought to ter-

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minate. Next-door, he could hear cheerful braying as the crime writers' celebratory party warmed up. Thank God, no more publishers' receptions . . .

"It is time, my son."

He woke from the happy doze into which he had sunk and smiled sleepily at the hooded figure who stood by his side.

"What about you, Father?"

A quiet smile twitched the gentle lips. "I am provided for. After all, my time was a turbulent one. My release has already been written. It only awaits the appointed hour."

Lord Peter yawned happily. "Cheerio, then, padre!"

The touch of the oil on his forehead was ineffably soothing. Already the sounds of merrymaking next-door had receded to a vague hum, and now the room itself seemed to sway and dim. A last happy thought illuminated Lord Peter's features and then, with a contented smile, he slipped into endless slumber.

With a crash the door slammed back and a gaggle of men and women clutching glasses and plates spilled into the room.

"The least we can do is send the old boy off with a glass of the best," declared the chairman. "After all, it was a bloody good wheeze."

The writer from Wales hung back with the ghost of a smile. The solution to the problem of the sovereigns had just occurred to him. And there was the matter of sequels. He was a man of his word, but he had been careful to ensure that the contract had made no stipulations in that respect. . . .

"It was certainly damn good fun."

"Leave a bit more room for us on the shelves of Smith's."

They stopped and gazed around.

"I say! There's no one here. Bloody Wimsey's disappeared. That's a bit steep!"

"That's the trouble with characters. Not a scrap of gratitude."

They turned to protest to the writer from Wales; but he was not to be found. Grumbling amiably enough, the writers headed back to the bar.

A faint breeze rustled along the far wall and something that might have been a brown habit slipped briefly in and out of sight.

"That's better," murmured a faint, aristocratic voice out of the empty air. ●

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YULE TIED

by Katherine H. Brooks

In Natalie's field stood a giant catalpa,
Her pride and her treasure, with seed-pods that hung,
And Frank, who resented the rubble beneath it,
Was constantly given a piece of her tongue.
This Christmas she'd gone to the field with a stringer
Of tinsel and suet and angels and rope.
She'd climbed to the top of the tree on a ladder—
Extended too far—with a dangerous slope,
While Frank, who observed from the depth of a window,
Was clapping his hands in a spasm of glee.
Having sawed at the rung of the ladder extension,
He waited to see what the outcome would be.

Each pod that hung down held a bright shiny angel,
The trunk was entwined with a silver festoon,
And the wind whispered gently as hundreds of dancers
Reflected and swirled by the light of the moon.
Beside them was dangling Natalie Hobson,
As silent and stiff as a panel of wood.
With her shiny black boots and a packet of suet
She looked like Saint Nick in a red quilted hood.
"How nicely she blends—like a Santa descending!
I'm happy," said Frank, "she's accomplished her aim.
The neighborhood kids will look out in the morning,
And scream at their parents that Santa Claus came!"

Then quickly attacking the stockings, he muttered,
"She's always been great at whatever she's tried!"
And, searching around through a tangle of presents,
He reached for the candy with poison inside.

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Intent to Kill

by Monica Quill

He had often thought of killing Maud, in dreams and imagination, approaching the task with cold logic, carefully covering his tracks, getting it over with and then feigning inconsolable grief at the loss of his wife. Who would ever suspect him of being responsible for what would appear to be a quite natural, if tragic, occurrence?

Doing the deed in real life proved somewhat more taxing. For one thing, there was the fear that turned his body clammy and made it difficult to recall the steps of the plan, even caused him to imagine that a dozen pairs of suspicious eyes were on him at all times.

Nonsense, of course, and he fought against the fear. After all, he had a double motive now. The longing to be rid of Maud had become so habitual that it seemed to concern himself alone, only his freedom, the shrugging off of the weight of her hateful presence and walking the earth a free man again.

He had long since given up the notion that others would understand his desire to be rid of his wife. She was beautiful, with others she was charming, even witty. Charles had watched men fall victim to her charms as she effortlessly enchanted them. It was all an act, of course. Once she had acted in the same way with him, but in those days neither of them realized that she was not serious, could

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not be serious, about such matters. Men were toys to play with, and it would have been against her nature not to lure them.

Annoying but innocent. And, in its way, beneficial to him. Women sympathized with him as they fumed over Maud's triumphant domination of the room.

"She's so friendly," their next-door neighbor had said when he came upon her in the kitchen, dabbing at her eyes. In the living room, Maud was putting the woman's husband Fred through her ringmaster's hoops.

"Only in public."

"Oh?"

"She's very good at parlor games."

"Just so they remain in the parlor."

"They always have."

"Are you sure?"

"Would we be talking like this if I weren't?"

It brought them together, Catherine Willis and himself, but of course that was only a little parlor game of their own. Sometimes he and Maud and the Willises made a foursome at golf, and when Maud pleaded with Fred to show her how to hold the club, how to swing it properly, just help her, please, Charles would drive away with Catherine in the golf cart they shared, sparing them both the spectacle. Just for fun they would mimic the antics Maud and Fred were engaged in. Standing behind Catherine while she putted, his arms around her, his hands gripping hers on the club, Charles felt a sudden dizziness and stepped back.

"Isn't this right?" Catherine asked saucily, looking back at him over her shoulder.

"Too right."

"Oh."

Small wonder that his fantasies about ridding himself of Maud sometimes included a sequel in which he and Catherine, side by side in a golf cart, rode into the sunset together. He dismissed the thought. He did not intend to regain his freedom only to throw it away again before he had enjoyed it.

Enjoying it meant solitary global trips, alone in foreign cities, waiting for some unplanned adventure to happen. The point of freedom was that it be unpredictable.

Catherine called him at the office and asked him to take her to lunch. What could he do? He suggested they meet at the club.

"I'm calling from town. We don't want to go all the way out there."

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"Where would you like me to take you?"

"Horners."

Horners was a saloon overlooking the river. It had a very limited luncheon menu, was frequented by college kids, and sounded like lots of fun, a real break from routine. He said he'd meet her there.

"Oh no you won't. I took a cab downtown. Shall we meet in the lobby of your building?"

He suggested they meet in the garage where he parked his car.

"Were you afraid we'd be seen together?" she asked him at the garage.

"Who suggested Horners?"

She laughed, then stopped abruptly. "Why am I laughing? It's not funny."

"What?"

"You lied to me."

"About what?"

"About Maud. About it being only a parlor game with her."

She gave him the gory details while they drank beer and plucked greasy goodies from the plastic baskets they had ordered. A hamburger, dripping with number thirty oil, french fries ditto, bock beer. The lunch might have been a suicide pact.

"I have proof that they have gone to motels at least three times."

"Proof?"

"Credit-card bills."

He looked at her. "Do your bills tell you who he was with?"

Catherine put the tip of a french fry between her sharp little teeth and nibbled it to death. After licking her fingers, she said, "I followed them."

He wanted to deny that this could be true, not to protect Maud's reputation, but to stave off the silly feeling Catherine's charges brought. Angry as he had been with Maud, hating her so much he wanted her dead, he had been complacent about her morals. Flirt, yes, she couldn't help it. But actually go off to a motel with another man? He felt the sharp sting reserved for the cuckold, a pain that does not require that the husband really give a damn about his wife. Maud had made a fool of him. It was an extra reason to kill her.

And so finally he laid his plans, moving the project from dream and fantasy into the real world, feeling, as a result, terror and fear of being apprehended, but feeling excitement, too. It was a game played for great stakes. Success would mean either of two things—

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freedom, if he carried out his plan to perfection, or a far more definitive loss of freedom if he were suspected, charged, convicted, imprisoned. An emotion keener than fear came over him. He felt like a god, holding both Maud's fate and his own in his hands.

Her death must seem an accident, of course, but simply as a matter of insurance, a plausible suspect must be provided. Charles himself would be miles from the scene, of course, so far as anyone knew or could come to know. Fred would be on the scene and, given Maud's liaison with him, available as suspect if suspicion was indeed aroused. Fred seemed even more perfect as a target of suspicion in the light of Catherine's later information.

"It's over," she told him as they danced one evening at the club. "And no credit to Fred."

"Oh."

"Maud dumped him."

"He told you that?"

"I heard them on the phone."

"You eavesdropped?"

"Of course. Don't you?"

"Apparently there's no longer any reason to."

There was certainly no visible sign of a breach between Maud and Fred Willis. They had made a foursome for the club Mardi Gras dance, and Charles could look over Catherine's shoulder at his wife dancing with Fred, apparently having the time of her life.

But soon he had reason to think that Catherine was lying to him. He had Gorman, an investigator his law firm often employed, check out the motels Catherine claimed Maud and Fred had dallied in. It seemed it had never happened.

"Of course they wouldn't have used real names," Gorman reported with the certainty of a longtime student of infidelity. "But no one recognized their photographs either."

"Do you trust your informants?"

"No. I buy them."

Gorman was a longtime student of informers as well. Charles believed him and decided that Catherine was either flat-out lying or imagining things. In any case, she now had conveniently removed what might have appeared to be his motivation for killing Maud. The imagined affair was over, they were all just friends again.

And it was time for Maud to die.

He arranged to be out of town. His secretary bought tickets well in advance of the Easter holiday. He arrived in Chicago to find

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O'Hare teeming with college kids and service personnel. The portion of his ticket to Chicago would be recorded as used; he had to insure the same for the Denver leg. A year ago at this time, he had been grateful that his ticket had been bought well in advance. All around him in the oversold flight were kids destined to spend hours waiting for the next flight, maybe even spend the night in the terminal.

Charles checked in, took a seat, and waited. This was a crucial part of his plan, yet it depended on something outside his control. Would this year be like the last? His doubts disappeared as the waiting area filled up and kids began sprawling on the floor when there was nowhere else to wait. Eventually the announcement came. The flight was overbooked, anyone willing to surrender his seat would be given a credit toward a future flight within the continental United States. A groan greeted the announcement. Across from Charles, a young man looked wildly about. He wore a baseball cap backwards on his head and had a bright blue and gold muffler wrapped around his neck.

"And I'm standby. I got to get home."

His remark was met with a minimum of sympathy, although solidarity among the passengers grew as the offer was renewed. The boy with the backwards baseball cap went up to the counter to urge his case, but after several minutes wandered away. Charles got up and caught up with the young man.

"I heard you say you had to get on this flight."

"There's no hope. They can't even promise me I'll get on the next one." There was genuine anguish in his voice.

"An emergency?"

He opened his mouth, then closed it. He grinned. "It is to me."

"How so?"

"My girl wants to break our engagement."

Charles would have preferred a more compelling emergency, but he didn't have time to seek a substitute.

"Look, I'll give you my seat assignment. I can stay over here. While waiting for the flight, I've been tempted by the thought of checking into the Hilton and getting a good night's rest."

"But what will you do tomorrow?"

"We'll just trade tickets."

"Can you just give me your assignment?" He looked anxiously back at the counter.

Charles smiled. He got out his ticket wallet. "Just use this. Go as me. You'll have to sit in first class though."

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"First class!" The kid's eyes bugged.

"Shh. Take it." He handed the ticket wallet to the kid, who almost immediately gave it back to him.

"I can't do that."

"I thought you had to get to Denver."

"I do."

"All right then."

His crisis of conscience was soon over. He took Charles's ticket and seat assignment, and handed over his own ticket. Charles suppressed a yawn, picked up his bag, and told the kid he was headed for the O'Hare Hilton.

But when he came out of the concourse, he went down to the street floor and bought a ticket on the shuttle back to Indiana. As he rode through the night, heading homeward to rid himself of Maud forever, he smiled at the thought that it would be a matter of record that he had taken the flight to Denver. Belatedly it occurred to him that checking into the Hilton would have certified his being away equally well. He could have gone to his room, messed up the bed, and left the hotel and hopped onto this shuttle bus. He would have been out some money, but less than for the plane ticket. Ah well. Next time. His smile was reflected in the window beside him.

The shuttle arrived at the airport of his hometown. Charles's car was in the parking lot. He drove to the twenty-four hour supermarket three blocks from his house, left his car in the parking lot, and continued on foot. His house was dark when he approached it but there was still a light on next-door at the Willises'. He went around to the back of his house and let himself in quietly. Later he would create the appearance of a break-in. For now it was more important not to wake Maud.

He waited inside the back door and, when his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, moved swiftly through the house toward the stairway. Before he reached it, he tripped over something, and went sprawling across the room, off balance. He crashed into a chair, overturning it, taking down a lamp as well. It fell onto the coffee table, scattering the gewgaws Maud kept on it. Charles struck his head against something, and when he got to his feet and touched his forehead his hand came away sticky with blood. He went to the wall switch and turned it on. What he had stumbled over was the body of Maud.

Her eyes stared sightlessly at him from her discolored face. He stared at her for a full minute in the stark glare of the overhead

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light. Then he knelt beside her. She was definitely dead. A great wave of relief rolled through his mind, bringing with it an indecent desire to shout for joy. He was innocently rid of Maud. She was dead and he hadn't killed her. He looked up the stairs, wondering if she had fallen, but then he saw the scarf twisted terribly around her throat. It looked to be one of his own.

He unwound it carefully and was standing with it in his hands when headlights swept in the drive and there was the sound of running toward the house. Someone pounded on the door. What the hell. He went to answer it. Hardly had he unlocked it, when a policeman pushed his way in and was followed by another. Charles was slammed against the wall and rapidly searched for weapons. Anger boiled up in him.

"What the hell are you doing? I live here."

"What's this?"

The second cop was looking down at Maud's body. He picked up the phone and made a call. In the still-open doorway, Catherine appeared, wearing a robe, her eyes like saucers.

"Charlie! What are you doing home?"

"Would you tell these maniacs that I live here?"

But Catherine was looking past him at Maud. Her mouth rounded in surprised horror. She looked at him.

"Oh, Charles. What have you done?"

His memory of what happened next was blurred, and try as he would to recall it accurately during the months he awaited trial, it never quite came into focus. When he was indicted for the murder of Maud, he hired Gilligan, the best trial lawyer in town, a man whose knack for getting acquittals or risible sentences for clients that everyone knew were guilty as charged had hitherto excited Charles's disdain. But he needed Gilligan now, as became increasingly clear.

"We got to come up with a story to counter the facts they've dug up, Charles."

The kid to whom he'd given his ticket had happily told investigators what had happened in O'Hare. He had kept what was left of Charles's ticket as proof of the way he had conned a man out of a first-class ticket with a story about his threatened engagement.

"You acted out of compassion," Gilligan said, trying it out. "But why did you take the shuttle back here?"

Several people on the shuttle had identified him; so much for his unrecorded return. Gilligan listened impassively while Charles told

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him again what had happened when he got home. He closed his eyes in thought and tried a possible reconstruction.

"Out of consideration for your wife, you didn't turn on any lights. You didn't want to wake her. We'll keep the part about stumbling too, that accounts for the furniture that was smashed up during the struggle."

"What struggle?"

Gilligan held up his hand. "Hey, I'm your lawyer. No bullshit, okay?"

Gilligan assumed he was guilty. His fate was sealed when Catherine decided to take the blame for what had happened. Charles was insanely jealous, she testified, and she and Fred had conspired to tease him. Fred had pretended to be having an affair with Maud.

"I told Charles I knew they had been going to motels together."

Under oath, Gorman reluctantly admitted checking out motels for Charles. He had also taken around photos of Maud and Fred.

"And?"

"Nothing."

"When I saw what it was doing to Charles," Catherine went on, looking tragically toward the jury, "I told Fred we had to stop. So I told Charles the big affair was all over. Maud had dismissed Fred."

Catherine burst into tears and Charles noted the sympathetic looks of the jurors. "It's all our fault. We drove him to it."

Despite Gilligan's best efforts, using what Catherine had said to play on the sympathy of the jurors, Charles got the maximum sentence from the woman judge, who insisted in her instruction to the jury that when all was said and done this was a case of the cold-blooded murder of a wife by a calculating, cruel husband who had no claim on their mercy.

"Fortunately he was stupid enough to leave unmistakable evidence of his foul deed. And he had the murder weapon in his hands when the police arrived."

Charles turned and looked at Fred Willis and his lying wife, who was seated beside him. The gleam in Fred's eye before he turned away was that of guilt. Catherine had the look of a woman whose husband would be eternally in her debt. Charles was led away. He had lost both Maud and his freedom and there wasn't a soul in the world who would believe he was innocent. A more philosophical man might have considered that he was being punished for what he had intended to do. But, if he had been philosophical, he might have gotten used to Maud. ●

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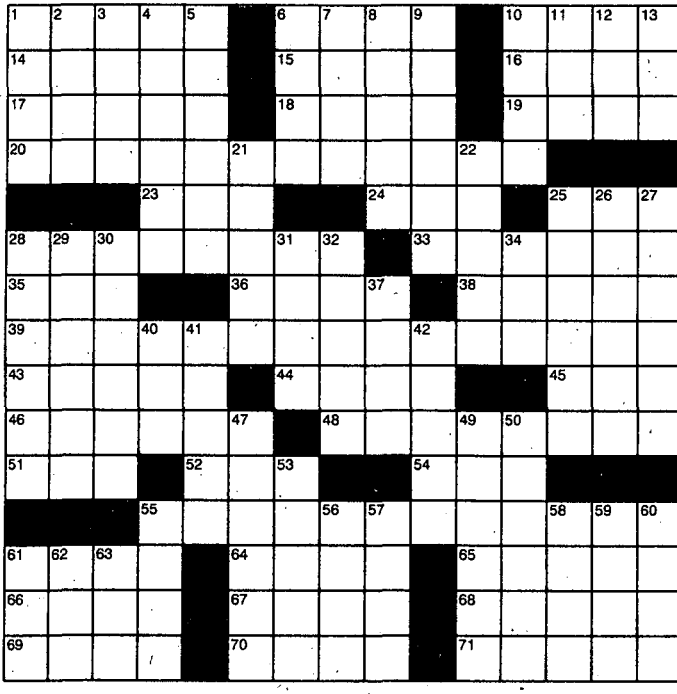
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

Mystery Menu

by Leigh Woznick



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ACROSS

1 Skier's milieu
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15 Before late or logic
16 Inspector Dalgliesh
17 Bad-tempered
18 Silent entree choice? (Harris)
19 Celtic archaeological sites
20 Menu's dessert (F. Kellerman)

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23 Wallach or Whitney
24 _____ *Evil Dreams* (R. Harris)
25 Good times
28 Menu entree (Kerr)
33 "Scotch" rose
35 Border
36 Sevres sky
38 27-ingredient side dish? (Pickard, after Rich)
39 Menu's title (Dunlap)
43 Murderous mother
44 John's Ono
45 Operators' org.
46 Incendiary felonies
48 Last item on the menu (Smith)
51 Concorde, for short
52 Pessimist's rejoinders
54 Earth sci.
55 Critique of menu (Stout)
61 Take-out menu? *Murder* _____ (Lathen)
64 *Death Beyond the* _____ (Mann)
65 Apportion
66 Border on
67 Shade for O'Neill's desire?
68 Itsy-bitsy
69 Menu quaff "for the dreamers"? (MacDonald)
70 End a case in court
71 Mystery writer's aspiration

DOWN

1 Con
2 Centers of activity
3 Hurler Hershiser
4 Acted the valet
5 Treat like a pharaoh
6 Detained, as for questioning
7 *Tabernacle* location (Cook)
8 Author Brett
9 Mingle with the in-crowd
10 Rosemary's little devil
11 Fuss
12 Fall behind
13 Dorothy's auntie, and others
21 Reunion goer
22 Caterpillar comb. form
25 Consolidating
26 Jai alai ball
27 Generate, as trouble
28 Sit-coms antitheses
29 Sea ducks
30 During
31 Realtor's descriptive
32 Wyoming range
34 Unit of fluidity
37 Mischievous Norse god
40 Classic preceder
41 Smallest prefix
42 Bag for menu leftovers?
47 Oklahoma footballer
49 Greek witch
50 Equipped a plant
53 Mona Lisa feature
55 Lug
56 Charity
57 Spot for Linda Davies's vipers
58 Designer Cassini
59 Annie Darling's favorite blend
60 Pripet feeder
61 Shoot a marble
62 Sash
63 38 or 22

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Art by Ron Chironna

WHERE THE SNOW LAY DINTED

by Reginald Hill

Dalziel awoke.

He knew nothing, remembered nothing, and felt neither the desire nor the will to activate cognition.

He lay unmoving and might have so continued for an indefinite period had not a physical sensation finally forced itself upon his embryonic consciousness.

His bollocks were cold.

Time to make contact with the waking world. Nothing rash, minimum risk. He opened his left eye just sufficiently to admit light in the smallest measure known to man, which is a single scotch in an English pub.

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Jesus wept!

Light poured in, white and blinding as if someone had indeed poured a glass of whisky onto his eyeball. He squeezed the eyelid shut and lay still till the dancing white patina had faded from his retina.

Sight no good, so try the other senses . . .

Touch . . . cold, he'd already established that . . .

Sound . . . voices, gently murmuring . . .

Smell . . . antiseptic . . .

Taste . . . BLOOD!

Oh God, I'm being operated on and the anesthetic hasn't took!

Yorkshire detective superintendent Andrew Dalziel and his sergeant, Peter Pascoe, are Reginald Hill's most popular creations. Though some of Dalziel's Yorkshirisms may not be familiar to American readers, the drift of his bawdy humor is hard to miss. Beneath Dalziel's sometimes unmannerly behavior there is a keen mind at work, and a kind heart too. Just what's needed for a Christmas adventure. †

"Nobody move!" he bellowed, sitting bolt upright and opening both eyes wide.

In a huge dressing-table mirror he saw a naked fat man with a split lip sitting up in a four-poster bed. On a bedside table stood a half-empty bottle of whisky and a half-full bottle of TCP. Through a tall open window drifted a chilling draught, a blinding white light, and a murmur of voices.

He rolled off the bed onto the floor, landing on a spoor of damp clothes which ran from the doorway to the bedside. After a while he pushed himself to his knees. When his head didn't fall off, he rose fully upright, took three uncertain steps towards the window, and, catching hold of the pelmet to maintain verticality, looked out. And knew at last where, and when, and why he was.

He was in the Hirtledale Arms Hotel on the Yorkshire Moors, it was Boxing Day morning, and it had snowed hard during the night.

It was a scene to touch even the done-over heart of a hungover cop. The sky was delft blue and the still-low rays of the morning sun were gilding the horizoned hills, lending the curves and hollows the sensuous quality of female limbs in repose. Where the foothills gave way to pastureland, the varicosed lines formed by drystone walls

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were all that marked one field from another. Small trees and bushes sagged beneath the weight of their temporary blossom, while beech and oak and elm stood upright as judges in their wigs of white. About a mile away, the small village of Hirtledale had all but vanished under the sealing snow, but nearer still the fairy-tale turrets of Hirtledale Castle floated like something imagined by Walt Disney over the icing-sugared battlements.

Dalziel let his gaze drift down to the square of perfect lawn which was the pride and joy of Giles Hartley-Pulman, the hotel's owner. At its centre stood a bronze statue of little St. Agnes clutching a lamb, saved from dereliction in Rome (according to the hotel brochure) by a nineteenth-century Lord Hirtledale, and planted here when the hotel building had still been the castle's dower house.

The perfect lawn was now, of course, a blanket of perfect white, and this seemed to be the focus of attention of the several guests standing on the terrace immediately below Dalziel's window and whose soft conversation he had mistaken for the blasé chitchat of heartless surgeons.

So what was so interesting? wondered Dalziel.

He returned his attention to the lawn, and as his eyes adjusted to the dazzling light, he saw that its surface was not perfect after all.

From the feet of the statue ran a set of small human footprints with alongside them another set of even smaller animal hoofprints. The trail swung in a wide circle round the lawn, though always staying well clear of its edges, before returning to the base of the statue.

"Bugger me," said Andy Dalziel.

His exclamation drew the attention of the watchers below to his presence. They looked up at him with expressions ranging from the amused to the amazed. Among them, he spotted Peter and Ellie Pascoe, who maintained the neutral faces of people who'd seen it all before. If so, they were seeing it all again, for it suddenly occurred to Dalziel that he was stark naked.

Time for retreat. Any road, miracles shouldn't be taken on an empty stomach.

He belched gently, gave a little wave, and called, "See you at breakfast, I'm fair clemmed."

As he showered and shaved, memory struggled back into his mind like the sea up a long shallow beach.

At low-tide level, things were pretty clear. This time last week, he'd had no plans for Christmas and didn't give a toss. Then Peter

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Pascoe had let slip that he was planning to spend the break at the Hirtledale Arms, and suddenly Dalziel realised how much he'd been relying on the usual Boxing Day invitation to the Pascoes.

He must have let it show. Or perhaps Pascoe just felt guilty, because he'd started explaining.

"Not my cup of tea, really, but Ellie's mum, well, you know she's not long widowed and she needs a change of scene, and it takes the pressure off Ellie . . ." Then, with the expansive generosity of one who knew the hotel had long been booked solid, he'd added, "Look, why not join us? We'd all love to see you there."

And God, who is a Yorkshireman, had grinned, nipped a guest in the appendix, and made sure news of the cancellation reached the hotel five minutes before Dalziel rang.

When he heard the price quoted by Giles Hartley-Pulman (who immediately in Dalziel-speak became Giles Partly-Human), his Scottish/Yorkshire blood curdled. Then he'd asked himself, "What are you saving for? a cashmere winding sheet and a platinum coffin?" and booked. His reward had been the discovery that one of the things the inclusive price included was wine and liqueurs with Christmas dinner. Somewhere between the turkey and the truffles, he had a vague recollection of calculating that profligacy had turned into profit. And he thought he recalled starting on the liqueurs in alphabetical order, but now they sat like an oil slick on the tide of memory, turning it sluggish and opaque well short of high water. What he needed was some mental menstruum and he knew just the formula. First take a precise inch of the Macallum in a tooth glass and toss it straight down to avoid contact with your cut lip. Then add half a pound of streaky bacon, a black pudding, several eggs, and a potato scone, and chew gently.

He descended to the dining room to complete the cure.

As he entered, a voice cried, "Andy, good morning. Now the Great Detective is among us, the riddle of the perambulating statue will be solved in a trice. Or would you rather we all assembled in the library later?"

This was Freddie Gilmour, a young man who was something in the City and had been Christmasing at Hirtledale for many years with half a dozen like-mindless friends. They had adopted Dalziel in a way which Peter Pascoe found offensively patronizing. But Dalziel's huge frame was lead-lined, and this imperviousness, plus his prodigious feats of consumerism, had brought these devout free-marketeers to a wondering respect.

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"Nay, Fred," he said. "I only solve real mysteries. Like if you put your hand in your pocket and found some of your own money there."

Followed by a gust of laughter, he crossed the room and joined the Pascoes.

"Morning," he said.

He couldn't have behaved too badly last night because both Ellie and her mother gave him a welcoming smile, though the former's began to fade as little Rosie Pascoe piped up eagerly, "Uncle Andy, did you see? The statue went for a walk last night and took her little lamb with her."

"I don't think so, dear," said her mother who, though having nothing against flights of imagination, was a natural enemy of anything smacking of superstitious credulity. "I'm sure there's some other explanation."

"No, they went for a walk, you can see the footprints in the snow, isn't that right, Uncle Andy? Because anything can happen at Christmas."

Dalziel looked from mother to daughter. The same dark, serious, unblinking gaze, the same expression of expectant certitude.

Pascoe was observing him with a faint grin which said, "Get out of this one!"

"Aye. Owt can. That doesn't say it will, but."

Good try, but not good enough.

"But this *has* happened, hasn't it?" insisted the girl. "You can see the prints."

"That's right," agreed the fat man. "What I can't see is anyone to serve me breakfast."

"I get the impression there's some sort of crisis in the kitchen," said Pascoe.

"If there's not, there soon will be," said Dalziel, glad of an excuse to escape Ellie's threatening glare.

He rose, went to the kitchen door, pushed it open, and bellowed, "SHOP!"

Giles Hartley-Pulman, deep in confabulation with his chef and three young waitresses, jumped six inches in the air. His lean ascetic face was creased with concern, but oddly, when he identified the source of the sound, it relaxed ever so slightly.

There had been a moment last night when he would gladly have given half his kingdom for the privilege of never seeing Dalziel again. This had been when he bravely but foolishly attempted to slow, if not stem, the Fat Man's consumption of claret. To the

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applause of the other guests, Dalziel had flourished the menu, stabbing with a huge finger at the words *Wine and Liqueurs ad lib*, and saying, "Here in Yorkshire we've got a word for a man who's not good as his word! We'll try another bottle of the eighty-three."

A good hotelier knows when to withdraw. He also knows how to get even if the chance offers, and now Hartley-Pulman advanced, saying, "Superintendent Dalziel, thank heaven. There's been a burglary. I was about to phone the police, but of course with you on the spot, it seems a shame to drag someone out in these conditions . . . and I should hate for the Press to get involved, asking impertinent questions about my guests. . . ."

Meaning, I'd rather not have uniformed plods all over the place, but if I do, I'll make sure the world knows you were pissed the far side of oblivion last night!

Dalziel considered. Hirtledale was on the northernmost fringe of his mid-Yorkshire patch so he certainly had jurisdiction, if he cared to assert it. On the other hand, he didn't care for Partly-Human imagining he could threaten him.

Postponing decision, he said, "What's been stolen?"

"Well," said Hartley-Pulman, savouring the moment. "It's mainly . . . your breakfast."

And in the dining room conversation ceased as a great cry of pain and loss exploded out of the kitchen.

Five minutes later, Peter Pascoe was summoned to join his boss. It didn't take long to put him in the picture.

"Partly-Human's making a list," Dalziel concluded. "You talk to the staff, lad. Use your boyish charm."

"Yes, sir," said Pascoe, looking unhappily at the chef, who was breaking a bowlful of eggs into a pan. He didn't want to be involved in this but if he was . . . "Sir, shouldn't we seal the kitchen in case Forensic . . ."

"Stuff Forensic," said Dalziel. "There's nowt left but eggs and I need to keep me strength up."

Sighing, Pascoe went in search of the waitresses.

Fifteen minutes later, he returned to find Dalziel wiping the pattern off a plate with a slice of bread.

"You've got that aren't-I-clever look," said the fat man.

"We've got a name," said Pascoe. "Remember little Billy Bream?"

"In the frame for the Millhouse break-in, but CPS got their knickers in a twist. Still, it gave him a scare and he dropped out of sight."

"Hirtledale was where he dropped to. His old gran lives there.

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And Milly Staines, the waitress with the squint, she reckons she saw him hanging around here last night."

"Grand. Owt else?"

"Maybe. Patty Strang, the pretty blonde, says she glanced out of her window just as the snow was starting and saw someone down the drive. No description except it was too big for little Billy and moving very slowly."

"Even Billy 'ud move slow carrying this lot," said Dalziel, producing a list.

Pascoe whistled. As well as twelve pounds of sausage, fifteen pounds of bacon, forty kidneys, thirty kippers, twenty-five black puddings, and a kilo of salt, a dozen bottles of champagne had gone.

"One thing's certain, he must have left some tracks."

"Let's take a look," said Dalziel.

Close to the building the snow was already churned up, but a few yards down the drive they spotted two lines of footprints, one approaching, one moving away.

"How's your tracking, Pocahontas?" said Dalziel. "Get your wellies and let's see where these lead us."

Before they left, Pascoe had a quick word with Ellie, who rolled her eyes in not altogether mock rage and said, "Trouble follows the fat bastard but I don't see that's any reason why you should."

"We're just going to look at the tracks in the snow," protested Pascoe.

"Yeah? With a bit of luck he might catch pneumonia. If he does, my sympathy's with the bacilli!"

Freddie and the free-marketeers must have been earwigging on this exchange, for as Pascoe joined Dalziel outside the kitchen, they appeared in the doorway and struck up a rousing chorus of "Good King Wenceslas."

"Twits," muttered Pascoe. "Wouldn't surprise me if they had something to do with this."

"Wouldn't displease you, you mean," said Dalziel, acknowledging the carollers with a friendly two-fingered wave. "Where's your festive spirit, lad?" And joining in their song at the line *Mark my footsteps good my page*, he strode off up the drive.

As Pascoe floundered behind, already feeling the cold strike through his soles, the carol's words fell with heavy irony on his tingling ears. *Heat was in the very sod/ That the saint had planted.* No chance! You needed a saint for that and all he'd got was the very sod!

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Where the drive joined the road, the prints turned towards the village and were joined by another outward set.

"Accomplice," guessed Dalziel. "Stayed here to keep watch."

"Or someone who'd set out before the snow started laying," Pascoe contradicted sourly.

But as they walked on and he began to warm up, the enchanted silence of the snow began to work its magic on his mood. This was what Christmas was all about, not the gluttonous consumerism of the telly ads, but a brief interval in which all the filth and flaws of human existence were cloaked in a mantle of purest white.

They were approaching the gothic archway marking the entrance to the castle estate. They heard the sound of a hunting horn and a merry chatter of distant voices.

"Must be the Boxing Day Meet," said Dalziel. "I could just sup a stirrup cup. Come on!"

He hurried forward, clearly with every intention of turning into the castle grounds and inserting himself among the huntsmen. But his haste was almost his undoing, for as he reached the gate there was a drumming of hooves mingled with shouts and laughter, and the next moment a posse of red-coated riders erupted in front of them and galloped across the road into a wood. Pascoe, still in his master's steps, was protected from the worst of the spume of slush thrown up behind them, but Dalziel took the full brunt.

"Jesus wept," he said, coming to a halt. "And well he might!"

He looked, thought Pascoe, like a snowman on a Christmas card, lacking only the carrot nose and old pipe to complete the picture. It was a thought he kept to himself.

Another horseman came through the archway, moving at a more decorous pace. This was a much older man, grey hair showing beneath his black cap. He came to a halt in front of Dalziel and examined him for a moment. What might have been a glint of amusement touched his bright blue eyes but didn't extend to his narrow patrician face as he said courteously, "Sorry about that. Impetuous youth. I'll speak to them."

"Aye, but will the buggers listen?" said Dalziel, brushing off snow.

"Eventually, once they've ridden off all their festive excesses. No excuse, of course, but if we recall our own younger days and the tricks we got up to, perhaps we can forgive."

This appeal seemed to strike a chord in Dalziel who said, "Aye, well, I'll not die of a bit of snow. Daresay some on 'em enjoyed themselves so much last night, they didn't even get to bed."

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"They were certainly still carousing when I went up," said the horseman. "I'd better get after them before they find a frozen pond to ride across. Again my apologies. And Merry Christmas."

He touched his riding crop to his cap and cantered on.

"Know who that was?" said Dalziel. "Lord Hirtledale himself."

"Well, roll on the revolution," said Pascoe. "Never thought you were a forelock-tugger, sir."

"Long time since I had one of those," said Dalziel equably. "Thought you'd have been all for his lordship. Doesn't he chair that Bosnian relief gang your missus collects for? Cost me a fiver last time she rattled her can!"

"I don't see how that entitles him to prance around the countryside, slaughtering foxes."

"Nay, lad, you'd best put that one to the Pope next time you write. Too deep for me. I just hunt villains. Tally ho!"

They had no difficulty in refinding the trail beyond the hoofprints, but when they reached the cobbles of the village High Street, it vanished completely.

"What now?" asked Pascoe.

Dalziel didn't answer straightaway but thrust his great head forward and moved it slowly this way and that, like an old bear checking out the scents of the forest on waking from hibernation.

Then, showing his teeth in a hungry smile, he said, "I reckon I'll follow my nose up here. You sniff around further along."

He vanished down the side of a tiny grey cottage, leaving Pascoe to continue up the street, still scanning the trodden snow in search of the vanished spoor. But the combination of cobbled surface and the fact that people had clearly been out and about in the village made it an impossible task. Only on the steps of some of the cottages fronting the street did the snow lay even enough to take a good print, and all you got here were the perfect circles left by milk bottles.

He crossed the street to see if he had any better luck on the other side. And halted abruptly as a puzzling thought came into his mind.

Surely even out here in the country where some trace of old-fashioned standards of service still remained there was unlikely to be a milk delivery on Boxing Day?

Behind him a door opened. Something hard and cylindrical rammed into his spine, making him squeak with pain. And a harsh Yorkshire voice grated, "Stand still and state thy business. Now!"

Dalziel meanwhile was pushing open a kitchen door, his nostrils flaring wide.

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He found himself looking into the surprised eyes of a slightly built young man sitting at a scarred oak table, topping up a pint pot with Veuve Clicquot. In front of him was a huge plate piled high with the delicious freight of the full English breakfast.

"Morning, Billy," said the fat man genially. "Cansta spare a sausage?"

Ten minutes later he emerged, chewing pensively. Looking down the street he spotted Peter Pascoe sitting on the low wall running round the churchyard, cradling a large plastic carrier bag.

"You looked knackered," said Dalziel as he approached. "Should take more exercise."

"Fails my heart I know not how," said Pascoe. "What are you eating?"

"Kidney. Billy Bream's back there stuffing his face and washing it all down with bubbly."

"So why's he not here in handcuffs?" asked Pascoe without much passion.

"He says he found it all on his gran's doorstep this morning when he got back from the hotel."

"And what had he been doing at the hotel that kept him all night?"

"You recall yon bonny waitress, Patty Strang? That's what he says he was doing at the hotel that kept him all night."

"And you believe him?"

"Well, she looks a healthy young animal," said Dalziel. "Still, I admit that normally I'd have had him in for questioning so quick he'd have got indigestion. But when I opened my mouth to give him the caution, I found meself putting another sausage in. Peter, I think maybe I took a knock on the head last night and it's left me concussed. I've started imagining some very strange things. Tell me to get a grip on myself, then pop back in there and arrest Billy Bream, and I'll give you a big wet kiss."

Pascoe smiled wanly and said, "Sorry, sir, not even for such an inducement. You see, I've been having a strange encounter of my own. With Miss Drusilla Earnshaw of this parish, age eighty-three, vegetarian and devout Methodist, who poked her walking stick in my back and didn't take it away till she'd seen my warrant and my library card. Then she told me a very strange story indeed."

"I don't think I want to hear it," said Dalziel.

"I don't imagine you do," said Pascoe. "Seems she was woken by a noise outside her cottage not long after midnight. She got up, took

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hold of her stick, and flung open her front door. A man was crouching on the step."

"Description?" said Dalziel desperately.

"Her eyes are bad. Big, broad, and brutish is the best she can do. But her hearing's fine. To her question, 'Who are you?' he replied, 'Never fret yourself, luv. It's only Good King Wenceslas.' Upon which, she hit him in the mouth with her stick and slammed the door. When she opened it this morning, she found these on her step."

He opened the carrier to reveal a bottle of Veuve Clicquot, five sausages, and a kipper. Dalziel looked at them, shivered, and touched his wounded lip as the tide of memory finally broke clear of the slick of liqueurs and ran clear and high, and oh, so very cold.

He let his gaze rise to meet Pascoe's. And spoke.

"Well, here it is at last, lad. Your big moment. Ring the Chief Constable, alert the Home Office, call out the SAS, and get yourself put in charge of a nationwide hunt for a well-built man with a cut lip and a bedroom floor covered with damp clothes who might be staying at the Hirtledale Arms Hotel. Could be the making of you."

"No thanks," said Pascoe, standing upright with sudden decision. "I'm made already, I reckon. But here's what I do suggest. You go back to the hotel, get in your car, and head for town. I'll say you've been called away on an urgent case. But first I'll go round the village and collect as much of the stuff as I can find. I'll tell Partly- Human that we lost the trail but are ninety percent sure it was some local lads, having a bit of a joke. . . ."

Dalziel was shaking his head.

"Nay, lad. Good try but it won't work. Local lads means yobs and poachers to the likes of Partly-Human. Vermin. He really would want to call in the SAS to flush 'em out."

"So what *do* you suggest?" demanded Pascoe, exasperated.

"Well, first off, I'm not going to take advantage of your loyalty to get me off the hook. But I'm touched, lad. Deeply touched."

His voice broke and he gave a choking cough.

"Please," said Pascoe. "No need . . ."

"Nay, I'm right. Bit of kidney got stuck, that's all. No, there are times when a man's got to face up to consequences. What is it I'm always telling you?"

Pascoe thought. None of the things that Dalziel was always telling him, such as he should eat more red meat, or that a university degree was what any convict could get between jerking off and sewing mailbags, seemed to apply.

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"Can't think, sir," he said. "What is it you're always telling me?"

"Speak the truth and the truth will set you free!"

Pascoe couldn't believe his ears.

"You've never told me that in your life!" he cried. "Besides, in this instance, it's rubbish. The truth will lock you up. You've got too many enemies, starting with Partly-Human. . . ."

"Peter, you always think the worst of people," remonstrated Dalziel. "There's good in everyone, especially this time of year. Remember the carol."

Seeking the tune, he began to intone, *"Wherefore Christian men be sure, Wealth or rank possessing . . ."*

"You won't have any rank," insisted Pascoe. "And precious little wealth. Andy, it's your career . . ."

But Dalziel was away down the street, the words now bursting out in a thunderous baritone.

"Ye who now do bless the poor/ Shall yourselves find blessing!"

Fifteen minutes after his return, he emerged from Hartley-Pulman's office looking solemn. Pascoe, waiting anxiously, cried, "What did he say? What did you tell him?"

"I told him the truth," said the fat man. "And it's okay, lad. Like the decent chap he is, he listened, he understood, he forgave, and now he's starting to forget. And I'm off down to the kitchen. All this confessing don't half make you hungry! And it's a shame to waste yon stuff you rescued from the old lady."

He walked away smiling. He loved Pascoe dearly, but it did his heart good to see those intelligent, sensitive features gobsmacked from time to time. Not that he hadn't been touched by the lad's willingness to cover up for him. But why tell lies when the truth was good enough? And in his dealing with Partly-Human he'd spoken nowt but gospel truth.

Of course what most folk forget is, there are four versions of the Gospel.

He'd said, man to man, "I followed them tracks as far as the castle where I came across Lord Hirtledale and some of his young guests. High spirited lads, but no harm in them. His lordship and I spoke briefly—man with a mind like that doesn't need things spelt out—and he apologised sincerely for any inconvenience his young friends may have caused. He said . . . but I reckon a chap like you doesn't need things spelt out either. Suffice to say, if you can see your way to keeping this business under your bonnet, you'd be

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highly obligating someone not a million miles away. No names, no pack drill. In fact, the only name you need bother with is mine, 'cos that's the one that'll be on the cheque covering your losses. And I'll tell you, I'll be proud to sign it. What do you say? Draw a line under this lot? It won't be forgotten, I promise."

Partly-Human was looking as if the Michelin guide had just awarded him three stars.

"Well, naturally, in those circumstances, I'm only too happy to oblige. And I must say I'm pleasurably surprised by your part in this, Superintendent."

"Andy," said Dalziel. "Well, it 'ud be a sad world if them as are born to rule it couldn't sow a few wild oats. Tell you what, I bet his lordship 'ud be really chuffed if half the damages went to his Bosnian Relief Fund, eh, Giles?"

And Partly-Human, to his credit, hardly blanched as he said, "I think that's a lovely idea, Andy."

Driving home the next day, Dalziel grinned at the memory. All right, it had cost him, but he'd really enjoyed his break.

Best of all, though, had been the delight on Rosie's face, not to mention the dismay on her mother's, as they'd all stood on the terrace together before they left and examined the mysterious footprints still visible on the lawn.

"You see, the statue did walk, Mum," insisted the little girl. "Because it's Christmas. Isn't that right, Uncle Andy?"

"That's right," said Dalziel, winking broadly at Ellie. "Everyone gets what they want at Christmas, that's what it's all about."

Everyone who had an Uncle Andy, anyway. It was funny, all these clever buggers like Pascoe, and not one of them had thought to speculate why the kitchen thief should have included a kilo of salt in his swag. But the salt had been the first and principal object of the raid. The Wenceslas idea had been an afterthought.

He'd trotted round the still snow-free lawn, marking out the trail of footsteps and hoofprints in salt. On the rest of the frost-hard surface, the big flakes had soon started to settle, but for a while those that hit the salt melted away. And when the white coverlet was complete, the spoor of prints remained to baffle the adults and delight the little girl.

Andrew Dalziel threw back his head and laughed long and loud, and God, who is a Yorkshireman, looked fondly down on him and laughed too.

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Rosie Pascoe, drowsy by her gran's side in the back of her dad's car, was also looking back on Christmas with pleasure. Of course, any time spent in the close company of adults was bound to have its baffling elements. Like did her mum and dad *really* like Uncle Andy or not? *She* liked him, because he was funny, and kind, and never worried about being rude. Also, because he was a bit sad sometimes.

She recalled Christmas night when she couldn't get to sleep because of all the day's excitements. Finally she'd got up and looked out of the window. There on the lawn, she'd seen him, Uncle Andy, lumbering around like an old dancing bear with the snowflakes whirling like moths round his great grey head. He'd been pouring something onto the grass, she didn't know what. But she didn't doubt next morning that it had something to do with the statue's supposed footprints.

Now, why Uncle Andy should want people to think the statue had walked, she didn't know. It was silly really. Statues couldn't walk, everyone knew that. But it was what he wanted, and that was enough for her to give him her total uncritical support.

Everyone gets what they want at Christmas . . . even Uncle Andy . . .

She fell asleep with her head on her grandmother's lap. ●

Solution to the Mystery Crossword

S	L	O	P	E	■	H	U	S	H	■	B	A	L	E
C	O	R	A	M	■	E	T	I	O	■	A	D	A	M
A	C	E	R	B	■	L	A	M	B	■	B	O	G	S
M	I	L	K	A	N	D	H	O	N	E	Y	■	■	■
■	■	■	E	L	I	■	■	N	O	R	■	U	P	S
D	E	A	D	M	E	A	T	■	B	U	R	N	E	T
R	I	M	■	■	C	I	E	L	■	C	H	I	L	I
A	D	I	N	N	E	R	T	O	D	I	E	F	O	R
M	E	D	E	A	■	Y	O	K	O	■	■	I	T	U
A	R	S	O	N	S	■	N	I	G	H	T	C	A	P
S	S	T	■	N	O	S	■	■	G	E	O	■	■	■
■	■	■	T	O	O	M	A	N	Y	G	O	O	K	S
T	O	G	O	■	N	I	L	E	■	A	L	L	O	T
A	B	U	T	■	E	L	M	S	■	T	E	E	N	Y
W	I	N	E	■	R	E	S	T	■	E	D	G	A	R

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Clothes
BY RUTH RENDELL

The Dog That Bit You
BY MARY KITTREDGE

***Luminarias* Make It Christmas-y**
BY JANET LAPIERRE

A Good Thing
BY SIMON BRETT

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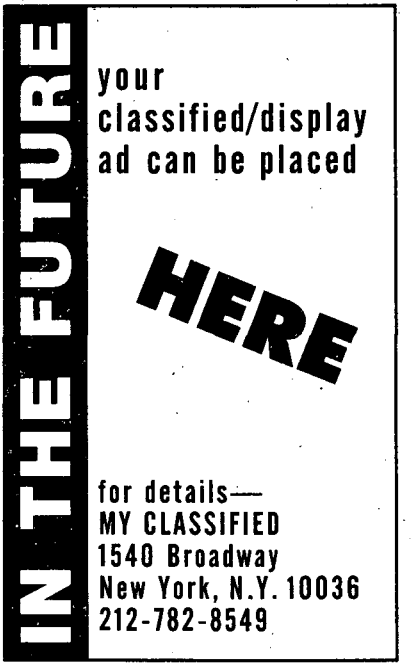

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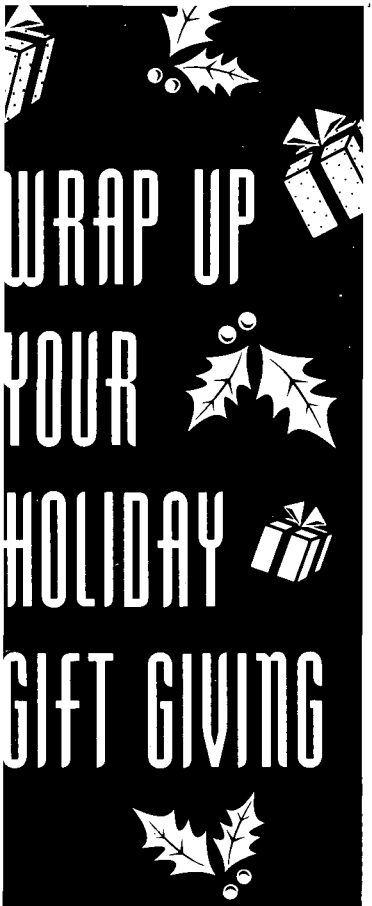

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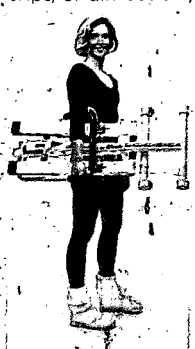

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